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## Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum

# Supplements to The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy

*Edited by*

Leora Batnitzky (Princeton University)  
Christian Wiese (University of Sussex)  
Elliot Wolfson (New York University)

VOLUME 11

# Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum

Proceedings of the Etty Hillesum Conference at  
Ghent University, November 2008

*Edited by*

Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt,  
and Meins G.S. Coetsier

*with the assistance of*

Carolyn Coman, Debbie Pevenage,  
and Gerrit Van Oord



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This book is dedicated to Etty Hillesum (1914–1943),  
chronicler of her people



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We are grateful to the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam for the permission to publish the photographs in illustrations 1–15.



## FOREWORD

The diaries and letters of Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) have a special place among the Jewish-Dutch testimonies of the *Shoah* (Holocaust). They contain not only a description of Camp Westerbork during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, but also reflect Hillesum's important, though unfortunately interrupted existential search of a spiritual, philosophical and literary nature. Many years after her death in the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau, the diaries have received worldwide attention and inspired hundred of thousands of readers.

We have the honour to present here the proceedings of the international Etty Hillesum Congress organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre of Ghent University in November 2008, in cooperation with the Heyendaal Research Program of the Faculty of Religious Studies of the Radboud University Nijmegen and the Institutum Iudaicum, Interuniversity Centre for the Academic Study of Judaism in Belgium. The aim of this congress was to invite Hillesum scholars from all over the world to exchange insights and to discuss problems that arise when studying Etty Hillesum's writings. About twenty speakers presented their papers and the American actress Susan Stein gave a performance of her theatre play about Etty Hillesum.

In this volume, all the papers of the congress have been included in a revised and annotated version. Looking back at the congress with gratitude, we would like to thank the various people and organisations that have made this meeting possible. First of all, we thank all those who accepted our invitation to attend the congress and by their enthusiasm and their dedication to Etty Hillesum and her literary heritage made it unforgettable for us. We especially thank those who presented their papers, Susan Stein for her most impressive performance, and the rector of Ghent University, Professor Paul Van Cauwenberge, for his cordial welcome at the beginning of the congress. Special thanks also to Carolyn Coman, Debbie Pevenage and Gerrit Van Oord, whose assistance in editing the text has proven most helpful and whose enthusiasm has given us strength and courage.

A number of organisations and institutions provided us with the indispensable financial aid, which enabled us to realize the congress in the beautiful surroundings of 't Pand in Ghent. In alphabetical order,

they are the Etty Hillesum Foundation, Amsterdam, Ghent University, Institutum Iudaicum, Radboud University Nijmegen and Research Foundation—Flanders (FWO). We wish to express our sincere thanks for their support.

We are very grateful to the editors of the *Supplements to the Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* who made it possible to publish these proceedings in their series. And we like to thank Jennifer Pavelko, Katelyn Chin, and Michael Mozina of Brill Boston for their continuous support and patience.

We end with an important piece of advice to the reader. The quotations from Etty Hillesum's writings are taken from *Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum 1941–1943* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002). This complete English translation by Arnold J. Pomerans of Etty Hillesum's literary heritage is indicated with the abbreviation E.T. In a footnote, the reader will find the original Dutch (or German) text, quoted from the fifth edition of *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2008). We hope that this will encourage our readers to compare the translation with the original.

23 March 2010

Klaas A.D. Smelik, Ria van den Brandt  
& Meins G.S. Coetsier

WELCOME SPEECH BY THE RECTOR OF GHENT  
UNIVERSITY, PROFESSOR PAUL VAN CAUWENBERGE,  
AT THE OPENING OF THE ETTY HILLESUM CONGRESS  
ON MONDAY EVENING 24 NOVEMBER 2008

Ladies and gentlemen,

The motto of Ghent University is: *Durf Denken* ('Dare to think'). I assume that if Etty Hillesum were still alive today, she would see herself reflected in our motto. Hence, Ghent University is the ideal location for this international congress dedicated to Etty Hillesum's life and writings. This congress has brought you together from countries all over the world: Canada, the United States, Ireland, Great-Britain, Portugal, Spain, Italy, France and the Low Countries near the Sea.

Etty Hillesum lived in a time when thinking and questioning (Dutch: *durf denken*) had become increasingly dangerous, even life-threatening. From the outset, National Socialism opposed free thought, which it considered a threat to the German people. Within four months of the appointment of Adolf Hitler as Reich Chancellor, this became painfully clear. Works demonstrating free thought were deemed inconsistent with Nazi ideology and were publicly burned.

On 10 May 1933, on the Opernplatz in Berlin, the S.A. and Nazi youth groups burned approximately 20,000 books from the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft and the Humboldt University; including works by Heinrich Heine, Thomas Mann, Karl Marx, Erich Maria Remarque and H.G. Wells. Student groups throughout Germany carried out their own book burnings on that day and during the following weeks. The German-Jewish poet Heinrich Heine has said "Dort, wo man Bücher verbrennt, verbrennt man auch am Ende Menschen" ('Where they burn books, in the end they also burn people'). And he was right.

In occupied Europe, free thought lead to arrests and deportation. One was better off not thinking, in order to avoid taking risks. Likewise, for the victims of Nazi-Germany's racial politics, who irrespective of their political beliefs were arrested and then deported to be murdered, the only solution seemed to be not to think, and even, yes, not to feel. Those who really reflected on what the Nazis intended to do to the Jews in Europe, were likely to lose all courage. Jews who



allowed their feelings to arise in this inhuman situation, were overwhelmed by despair. In a diary entry on Saturday 3 October 1942, Etty Hillesum expressed the feelings of the Jewish prisoners in the Dutch transit camp Westerbork:

At night, as I lay in the camp on my plank bed, surrounded by women and girls gently snoring, dreaming aloud, quietly sobbing and tossing and turning, women and girls who often told me during the day, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, otherwise we are sure to go out of our minds,” I was sometimes filled with an infinite tenderness, and lay awake for hours letting all the many, too many impressions of a much-too-long day wash over me, and I prayed, “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks.” And that is what I want to be again. The thinking heart of a whole concentration camp.

Contrary to the tendency of her fellow prisoners who wanted neither to think or to feel, Etty Hillesum asserted her desire to do just that: to think. She wanted to think not only for herself but for others with whom she felt connected. She wanted to be “the thinking heart of the barracks.” These words may sound pretentious, but what Etty Hillesum meant to say becomes clear in a letter that was illegally published during the war, which described her life in Camp Westerbork:

It is not easy—and no doubt less easy for us Jews than for anyone else—yet if we have nothing to offer a desolate post-war world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough. New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult. And perhaps, on the common basis of an honest search for some way to understand these dark events, wrecked lives may yet take a tentative step forward.

That’s why it seemed such a great danger to me when all around one could hear, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, it’s best to shut your eyes to all this misery.”

As if suffering—in whatever form and however it may come to us—were not also part of human existence.

It was an immense task that Hillesum assigned herself and her generation: “New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult.”

Post 1945 history shows that these new thoughts and new insights were certainly not concretely realized over night. It took many years before there really was peace in Europe, and certainly not without struggle, as the horrific civil war in former Yugoslavia has shown. And it took a number of years before what we call in Dutch *vijanddenken* (literary: ‘enemy-thinking’) was brought to discussion in Europe: it is not evident anymore to divide the world in good and bad guys but the development of ‘new thinking’ as a result of the war has taken much more time than one would expect.

We can demonstrate this by looking at the fate of Etty Hillesum’s diaries themselves. In the 1950s, there was hardly any interest in her writings among publishers, but in the 1980s, the situation had changed: the selection from the diaries, which was published in 1982 with the title *Het verstoorde leven* (‘An Interrupted Life’), became a global success: high sales and numerous editions and translations from Brazil to Japan. The time was right and readers wanted to know more about this ‘new thinking’ of Etty Hillesum, which coincided so wonderfully with the current way of life.

The development of “new thoughts” requires inner freedom. Daring to think (Dutch: *durven denken*) implies that we are courageous enough to depart from old and established ways of thinking in order to go down roads we never would have thought of travelling, making sure never to become a prisoner of ideology—no matter what ideology presents itself. This approach is apparent in a subsequent passage from Hillesum’s diaries that refers to a debate between her friends Julius Spier and Werner Levi, discussing the significance of Jesus. She noted the following:

On Friday [28 November, 1941] evening a discussion between S. and L. about Christ and the Jews. Two Worldviews, sharply defined, brilliantly presented, rounded off; defended with passion and vigour. But I can’t help feeling that every hotly championed Worldview hides a little lie. That “the truth” is always violated.

It is important to note that both debaters were German Jews: Spier as well as Levi. But Spier’s search had brought him in contact with Carl Gustav Jung and thus closer to Christianity. His opponent, the theatre director Werner Levi, defended the Jewish position, whereby Jesus as Messiah is radically rejected. Though the two men did their best to make their points, Etty Hillesum maintained reservations: she felt that both opponents adapted the truth to resonate with their own convictions more than it actually did. Etty Hillesum did not want to bind

herself to one particular ideology. She wanted to retain her freedom and to make her own judgments, to think for herself and to search for her own way of thinking.

But daring to think (Dutch: *durven denken*) is not an optional choice, nor is it a matter of retreating to an ivory tower. Daring to think should stem from a deep involvement with other people. When Etty Hillesum wrote: “Let me be the thinking heart of these barracks,” she meant that she would like to reflect on the meaning of her own experience, as well as the experiences of the Jewish people and the *Zeitgeist* in general. In a passage in which she addressed God, she wrote:

As I walk through the streets I am forced to think a great deal about Your world. *Think* is not really the right word, it is more an attempt to plumb its mystery with a new sense. It often seems to me that I can already discern the beginning and the end of this one phase of history, already see it in perspective. And I am deeply grateful to You for leaving me so free of bitterness and hate, with so much calm acceptance, which is not at all the same as defeatism, and also with some understanding for our age, strange though that may sound. One must understand one’s age just as one understands one’s contemporaries, for, after all, it is of their making, it is what it is and must be understood as such, however perplexing it may be.—

This understanding of the historical situation in which she and her people lived, should lead to “new thoughts,” to an understanding that would make the earth more liveable for the human race after the war. It is her contribution to a new future, her legacy for generations to come:

I wish I could live for a long time so that one day I may know how to explain it, and if I am not granted that wish, well, then somebody else will perhaps do it, carry on from where my life has been cut short. And that is why I must try to live a good and faithful life to my last breath: so that those who come after me do not have to start all over again, need not face the same difficulties. Isn’t that doing something for future generations?

We are that generation about which Etty Hillesum wrote. We live in freedom and can think freely without fear of losing our lives. This seems obvious, but it is not. Still, there are enough countries in the world where freedom of thought is regarded as a threat to the state’s interest. And even in democratic countries, there are active forces that would like to ban free thinking. Daring to think (Dutch: *durven denken*) is not only a challenge for us but a necessary duty.

Ladies and gentlemen, I wish you all fruitful days together, an open exchange of experiences and ideas and a joint cooperation in developing new thoughts for future generations.

Welcome to the Ghent University!



## LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

**Wil van den Bercken** (1946) is a Slavist and professor extraordinaire of Russian Church history at the Radboud University in Nijmegen. His publications include: *Ideology and Atheism in the Soviet Union* (Berlin & New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1989) and *Holy Russia and Christian Europe* (London: SCM Press, 1999). His most recent book is *Christian Fiction and Religious Realism in the Novels of Dostoevsky* (London: Anthem Press, 2010).

**Ria van den Brandt** (1960) is a philosopher, specialized in spiritual traditions, twentieth century life stories, poetry and textual reception history. She is associate senior researcher at the Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen, and affiliated researcher at the Westerbork Memorial Centre in the Netherlands. Van den Brandt is editor—with Klaas A.D. Smelik—of the *Etty Hillesum Studies*. She has written many articles on Etty Hillesum and other subjects, and published (as editor or writer) around fifteen books. Her book *Denken met Etty Hillesum* was published in 2006. Van den Brandt's actual field of research concerns Jewish witnesses of the Second World War, particularly witnesses of Theresienstadt.

**Rachel F. Brenner** (1946) is the Max and Frieda Weinstein-Bascom Professor of Jewish Studies and Professor of Modern Hebrew Literature at the Department of Hebrew Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has published widely on responses to the Holocaust in Jewish Diaspora literature, Israeli literature, and Polish Literature. Among her publications, *Writing as Resistance: Four Women Confronting the Holocaust: Edith Stein, Simone Weil, Anne Frank, and Etty Hillesum* (1997), translated into Spanish (2005). Her current project focuses on Polish writers' responses to the Holocaust.

**Francesca Brezzi** (1944) is Professor of Moral Philosophy and Philosophy of Differences at University Roma Tre. From 1998 to 2006, she worked as director of University Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Liberal Arts. Since May 2000, she has served as an appointed delegate on behalf of University Rector for Equal Opportunity—Gender

Studies. Brezzi's research focuses on philosophical moral issues, philosophy of gender and contemporary philosophy. Her interest in literature and philosophy revolves around the collapse of the monolithic subject as well the appearance of otherness or plurality inside the 'self.' This innovative assumption regards gender as an indispensable element for interpretation, hence, producing new systems of knowledge and reinterpreting linguistic fields. She is the author of *Antigone e la philia* (2004), *Le Grandi Religioni* (2005), and *Introduzione a Ricoeur* (2006).

**Meins G.S. Coetsier** (1977) was born in the Netherlands and obtained his B.A. and M.A. in philosophy at the Milltown Institute of Theology and Philosophy (National University of Ireland) in Dublin. In 2008, he was awarded Doctor of Philosophy at Ghent University for his work on Eric Voegelin. Coetsier is affiliated with the Research Foundation in Flanders (FWO), and is staff member at the Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOC). He is author of *Etty Hillesum and the Flow of Presence: A Voegelinian Analysis* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2008). He is currently focusing on Hillesum's writings in the light of Eric Voegelin, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

**Denise de Costa** (1958) wrote the first Ph.D. dissertation on Etty Hillesum: *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (Rutgers University Press 1999, translation of the 1996 Dutch edition). She has written several books and articles on Etty Hillesum, spirituality and women's lives. Her most recent work is a historical study on the unique location where she lives: *Wonen in een klooster: Clarissen, Theresiaantjes, gastarbeiders en kunstenaars* (Zwolle: d'jonge Hond, 2010).

**Patricia Couto** (1950) was born in the Netherlands and studied Germanic Philology in Coimbra (FLUC 1975). She holds a M.A. in Comparative Literature (FLUL 1996) and is a member of *Centro de Estudos Comparatistas* (Faculdade de Letras Universidade de Lisboa). Couto has worked at Portuguese schools and taught Dutch Language and Culture at FLUL. She has translated authors such as Jan Slauerhoff, Cees Nooteboom, Gerrit Komrij and Etty Hillesum into Portuguese. Currently, she is writing her Ph.D. dissertation on Glazemaker's seventeenth century translation of Fernão Mendes Pinto's *Peregrinação*.

**Jan Geurt Gaarlandt** (1946) studied Theology and Dutch Literature at Leiden University. He was director of 'Uitgeverij De Haan' but in 1986 founded his own publishing house 'Uitgeverij Balans.' Gaarlandt is the editor of three selections from Etty Hillesum's writings: *Het verstoorde leven* ('An Interrupted Life'), *Het denkend hart van de barak* ('Letters from Westerbork') and *In duizend zoete armen* (only in Dutch). In 1989, he edited a collection of essays on Etty Hillesum *Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn*. He is also a novelist under the name of Otto de Kat.

**Frits Grimmelikhuisen** (1937) studied philosophy and music. He taught at the Theatre High school in Arnhem and worked as music-therapist in a mental hospital. Since 1973, he has performed worldwide with—what he calls—a 'paper theatre', and has a small theatre at home in Deventer. In 1995, Grimmelikhuisen and his wife Manja Pach founded the Etty Hillesum Centre in Deventer. He has written various articles on Etty Hillesum and in 2004 he created a theatre piece based on her texts. In 2010, he hopes to finish his book on Etty Hillesum and Rilke.

**Paul Lebeau** (1924) entered the Jesuit novitiate in 1943. He studied in Belgium, the United States, Austria and France. Since 1961, he has taught theology at the Institut d'Études Théologiques, Faculté de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus, Brussels (Belgium). He wrote several works on the Church Fathers, the ecumenical movement, the origins of Christian art and the anthropology of monastic life. From 1993 to 1998, he was director of the *Foyer Catholique Européen*, a meetingpoint and retreat centre for the members of the European institutions in Brussels. His book *Etty Hillesum: Un itinéraire spirituel. Amsterdam 1941–Auschwitz 1943* was published in 1998.

**Fulvio Cesare Manara** (1958) is Research Fellow and Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Educational Studies of the University of Bergamo (Italy), where he teaches *Pedagogy of Human Rights* at a post-graduate level, along with other courses. As a philosopher and member of the Department of Human Sciences, he is involved in research and study on the practice of the Community of Philosophical Inquiry and in the field of non-violence. Together with Gerrit Van Oord, he is editor of the periodical *Con Etty: Quaderni di informazione e ricerca*.



**Maria Filomena Molder** (1950) is Professor of the Department of Philosophy, Universidade Nova de Lisboa, Portugal. She wrote her Ph.D. dissertation in 1992 on *Goethe's Morphological Thought*. Central to her research is the demonstration of how consideration of aesthetic issues can lead to a fertile understanding of what philosophy can be. Among her publications: *Semear na Neve: Estudos sobre Walter Benjamin* (1999) (Pen-Club Prize 2000 for Essay), *Matérias sensíveis* (2000), *O absoluto que pertence à terra* (2005), *Símbolo, analogia e afinidade* (2010).

**Nadia Neri** (1946) is a psychoanalyst and member of the Italian and International Jungian Association. She is the author of *Oltre l'ombra: Donne intorno a Jung* (Rome: Borla, 1995), which was translated into French, *Femmes autour de Jung* (Cahiers de psychologie jungiennes, 2002). Neri's book on Hillesum is titled *Un'estrema compassione: Etty Hillesum, testimone e vittima del lager* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 1999). She works and lives in Rome.

**Maria Gabriella Nocita** (1977) is a Ph.D. student in Theory, History and Methods of Education at the LUMSA University of Rome. She collaborates with the Department of Education and Teaching Methodology Planning of the University Roma Tre in the Research Laboratory of Pedagogy of Expression. Her studies focus in particular on the Philosophy of Education. She is the author of the essay "Sentire la vita: Etty Hillesum si fa parola," in: *La comunicazione umanante: Erme-neusi di un mistero*, ed. G. Scaramuzzo (Rome: Aracne, 2009).

**Gerrit Van Oord** (1948) was born in Indonesia and grew up in the Netherlands. Van Oord studied philosophy in Amsterdam and left for Italy in 1982. After twelve years of teaching Dutch language and literature in Rome, he and his wife Maria Korporal founded the publishing house Apeiron Editori in the early 1990s. His research, writing and publishing on Etty Hillesum began in 1986 with the first international seminar on Etty Hillesum in Rome (1989). He edited *L'esperienza dell' Altro: Studi su Etty Hillesum* in 1990, and together with Fulvio Manara he is editor of the periodical *Con Etty: Quaderni di informazione e ricerca*.

**Manja Pach** (1945) studied law at the University of Amsterdam. She worked thirty years as a judge at several courts. She is (co)founder of the Westerbork Memorial Centre and cofounder and first chairman of the board of the Etty Hillesum Centre in Deventer, founded to keep

alive the memory of the Deventer Jews, and to promote the writings of Etty Hillesum. She is also the chairman of the board of the Foundation “de Dierense Sjoel.”

**Debbie Pevenage** (1985) studied Germanic languages at Ghent University. In 2007, she was awarded Master of Arts in Linguistics and Literature in Germanic Languages (Dutch and German). Her thesis on Etty Hillesum, directed by Professor Klaas Smelik, was entitled “‘Het harmonisch rollen uit Gods hand lukte niet zo erg’: Worsteling en evenwicht in de dagboeken van Etty Hillesum.” Pevenage is a secondary school teacher and staff member of the Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOC). Currently, she continues her research on Hillesum’s writings.

**Alexandra Pleshoyano** (1962) wrote her Ph.D. dissertation in 2007 on *Etty Hillesum: l’amour comme ‘seule solution’: Une herméneutique théologique au coeur du mal*, under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Hermann Häring, Dr. Ria van den Brandt and Prof. Dr. Klaas A.D. Smelik. The book was published the same year at LIT Verlag. She did her postdoctoral research (2007–2009) at the KUL (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) and published a second book on Etty Hillesum: *J’avais encore mille choses à te demander: L’univers intérieur d’Etty Hillesum*. She is now associate professor at the Faculty of Theology at the University of Sherbrooke in Quebec, Canada, and is writing a book on the Jewish religious figures present in Leonard Cohen’s work.

**Brendan Purcell** (1941) studied philosophy at University College Dublin, and theology at the Lateran University in Rome, and was ordained a priest for Dublin diocese in 1967. He began a doctorate in the psychology of interpersonal relations at the University of Leuven, and taught psychology and philosophy at University College Dublin (UCD) from 1972 until retirement in 2008. He has published *The Drama of Humanity: Towards a Philosophy of Humanity in History* and with Detlev Clemens edited and translated Eric Voegelin’s *Hitler and the Germans*. At present, he is completing a book on human origins in the light of creation and evolution.

**Bettine Siertsema** (1955) studied Dutch Literature in Amsterdam. In 2007, she obtained her doctoral degree with a dissertation on Dutch autobiographical literature on the concentration camps. She holds a

research position at the Faculty of Philosophy of the *Vrije Universiteit* in Amsterdam. Siertsema wrote “The Burden of Responsibility and Guilt: Memoirs and Fiction on the ‘Grey Zone,’” in: *Mis/Representing Evil: Evil in an Interdisciplinary Key*, ed. Charlene P.E. Burns (Oxford: Interdisciplinary Press, 2009), 149–168; “Kampgetuigenissen: Herinnering in teksten,” in: *De dynamiek van de herinnering: Nederland en de Tweede Wereldoorlog in een internationale context*, eds. Frank van Vree & Rob van der Laarse, (Amsterdam: Bert Bakker, 2009), 106–127. Her present research focuses on the representation of the Holocaust perpetrator in literature.

**Klaas A.D. Smelik** (1950) was born in the Netherlands and studied Theology, Semitic Languages and Ancient History in Utrecht, Amsterdam and Leiden. He taught Old Testament and Hebrew in Utrecht, Amsterdam and Brussels, and Jewish History at the K.U. Leuven. Since 2005, he has taught Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ghent University and is director of the Etty Hillesum Research Centre (EHOC) there. He edited the Dutch and English unabridged editions of Etty Hillesum’s writings and, together with Ria van den Brandt, the *Etty Hillesum Studies*. He has (as writer or editor) published around 30 books and 200 articles on the Hebrew Bible, ancient Hebrew inscriptions, ancient history, Jewish studies, anti-Semitism, and Etty Hillesum. This year, he will publish a book on the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*.

**Patrick Woodhouse** (1947) is Canon of Wells Cathedral in Somerset, England, where he is responsible for music and liturgy. He has led many retreats and study days on the life and writings of Etty Hillesum in the United Kingdom, and in January 2009 his book *Etty Hillesum, a Life Transformed*, with a Foreword by Archbishop Rowan Williams, was published by Continuum. He has a particular interest in inter-faith issues and regularly takes groups to South India to explore contemplative spirituality as practised in different faith traditions.

## INTRODUCTION

Ria van den Brandt  
(Radboud University Nijmegen, The Netherlands)

From the very beginning, the Dutch publication of *Het verstoorde leven* ('An interrupted life') in 1981 was an overwhelming success. Soon afterwards, many translations were published and Etty Hillesum went—as she wished during her life—worldwide.<sup>1</sup> An irreversible international and colourful reception commenced, along with extreme reactions such as hagiographic admiration, identification, lack of understanding and rejection. Everybody seemed to know the truth about Etty Hillesum. It is noteworthy, however, that the worldwide reception was based on an incomplete and unreliable selection of Hillesum's texts. The publisher, Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, reveals in this volume how he at the time managed to edit a book out of "a small unattractive pile of papers," given to him by Klaas A.D. Smelik. The success of this selection exceeded his expectations. What was going on? In the early 1980's, Gaarlandt published two more selections,<sup>2</sup> but it was obvious that a complete and scholarly edition of Hillesum's texts was required. The Etty Hillesum Foundation in Amsterdam asked Klaas A.D. Smelik to address this need. The Dutch edition of all available texts of Hillesum was published five years after the first edition of *Het verstoorde leven*. Jan Geurt Gaarlandt gave it the title: *Etty: De nagelaten geschriften van Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*.<sup>3</sup> In this way, a unique testimony of a Jewish woman—ten diary notebooks and many letters—became known in our world.

A few years later, in 1989, Gaarlandt expressed his astonishment about the many reviews and essays on Hillesum: "It's shocking to read

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<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, the diaries have been translated in 17 languages: Catalan, Czech, Danish, English, Finnish, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Japanese, Modern Hebrew, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. A Russian translation is in preparation.

<sup>2</sup> Etty Hillesum, *Het denkende hart van de barak: Brieven van Etty Hillesum*, with an introduction of J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1982); Etty Hillesum, *In duizend zoete armen: Nieuwe dagboekantekeningen van Etty Hillesum*, with an introduction of J.G. Gaarlandt (Haarlem: De Haan, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> Edited by Klaas A.D. Smelik; text edition: Gideon Lodders & Rob Tempelaars (Amsterdam: Balans, 1986).

how many different aspects one can discover in her life and work. Literary, mystical, philosophical, historical, theological, psychological and therapeutic and therapeutic perspectives have generated material for many essays. She is compared and connected to people like Kafka, Meister Eckhart, Ruusbroec, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, Rilke, Jung, Seneca, Carry van Bruggen, Bonhoeffer, important representatives of literature, theology and philosophy. It has been said that her diary belongs to the most important documents of this century.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it was sixteen years before this apparently significant document was translated into English—*Etty: The Letters and Diaries of Etty Hillesum, 1941–1943*,<sup>5</sup> followed in 2008 by the French translation—*Etty Hillesum: Les écrits d’Etty Hillesum, Journaux et lettres 1941–1943*.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, the colourful but also controversial reception of Hillesum’s writings continued. Numerous books and essays were written, conferences and seminars organized, classes given and artistic productions created. Hillesum’s ‘small voice’ travelled around the world and went through many interpretations. Each language, each cultural domain, seemed to produce different images of Etty Hillesum.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, the diverse readings showed remarkable similarities and unexpected connections.<sup>8</sup> An international exchange of ideas and perspectives seemed to be mandatory.

In November 2008, we organized an international conference on Etty Hillesum at the University of Ghent,<sup>9</sup> focusing on two central themes of Hillesum’s work: spirituality and writing. Scholars and Hillesum commentators from all over the world came to Ghent to

<sup>4</sup> Jan Geurt Gaarlandt, “Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn,” in: *Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn: Reacties op de dagboeken en brieven van Etty Hillesum*, ed. J.G. Gaarlandt (Amsterdam: Balans, 1989), X.

<sup>5</sup> Translated by Arnold J. Pomerans; published by Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K.) and Novalis (Saint Paul University, Ottawa).

<sup>6</sup> Translated by Philippe Noble & Isabelle Rossalin; published by Seuil, Paris.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik, “Etty Hillesum in facetten: Inleiding,” in: *Etty Hillesum in facetten*, Etty Hillesum Studies 1, eds. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (Budel: Damon, 2003), 9–18.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Yukiko Yokohata, “Het beeld van Etty Hillesum in Japan,” in: *Etty Hillesum in context*, Etty Hillesum Studies 2, eds. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2007), 95–115.

<sup>9</sup> Organized by the Etty Hillesum Research Centre, Ghent University, in cooperation with the Institutum Iudaicum, Interuniversity Centre for the Academic Study of Judaism in Belgium, and the Heyendaal Research Program of the Faculty of Religious Studies, Radboud University Nijmegen.

give their papers. This volume, *Spirituality in the Writings of Etty Hillesum*, presents their texts and shows their different premises, approaches, disciplinary tools and future perspectives on Hillesum research and reception.

### *Biography*

Who was Etty Hillesum? Many things are said about her, but what are the ‘plain facts’? In “A Short Biography of Etty Hillesum,” *Klaas A.D. Smelik* gives an historical outline of her life, starting with her birth on 15 January 1914 in Middelburg. Etty Hillesum was born Esther Hillesum into a Jewish family. Her father Louis Hillesum was a classicist, and her mother Rebecca Bernstein, a teacher of Russian language, was a Russian refugee. Etty Hillesum had two brothers, Jaap (1916) and Mischa (1920), both very talented but mentally unstable. After completing the gymnasium in Deventer, Etty Hillesum went to Amsterdam to study law. She took her master exams in Dutch Law in 1939 and studied Slavonic languages as well. The war prevented her from completing this study, but she continued to learn and teach Russian. In 1937, Etty Hillesum took a room in the house of the accountant and widower Han Wegerif (Gabriel Metsustraat in Amsterdam). She was not only Wegerif’s housekeeper but also his lover. In 1941, after meeting the psycho-chirologist Julius Spier, Hillesum decided to go into therapy with him and started a diary. Keeping a diary was not only therapeutic. It also nourished her early literary ambitions and her later drive to be a chronicler of the fate of the Jewish people in her time. A remarkable and essential characteristic of Etty Hillesum’s diary, however, is her psychological and spiritual development, strongly influenced by Julius Spier, with whom she had an intimate relationship. Meanwhile, the anti-Jewish measures increasingly impacted Etty Hillesum’s life. In July 1942, Hillesum applied for a position within the *Joodsche Raad* (‘Jewish Council’) and received an appointment to an Amsterdam office of this organization. Shortly afterwards, she asked to be transferred to the department of ‘Social Welfare for People in Transit’ at Camp Westerbork. In 1942, she had three short stays at this transit camp. Illness forced her to go back to Amsterdam. She returned to Amsterdam for the last time on 5 December 1942, and stayed there until her departure on 6 June 1943. On 5 July 1943, the special status granted to personnel at the Camp Westerbork section

of the Jewish Council came to an end. On 7 September 1943, Etty Hillesum was deported to Auschwitz. According to the Red Cross, she died at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943.

### *Spirituality and God*

Etty Hillesum's life underwent a profound process of change in a very short time. In his essay "The Roots of the Chaos, and the Process of Change in Etty Hillesum," *Patrick Woodhouse* stresses this aspect of Hillesum's process. He analyzes her early diary texts, focusing on her reports of inner chaos. What were the roots of this chaos? Hillesum herself pointed to her family, especially to her parents. She recognized in her father's philosophical nihilism signs of despair and helplessness, and Etty Hillesum found this threatening. Her mother's character was rather capricious and chaotic, and made life in the Hillesum household impossible. According to Woodhouse, Etty Hillesum's parents were "two emotionally inadequate people," not able to help their own children. Hillesum herself called her parents' home a "madhouse" and was very aware of the mental instability of her two brothers. The Hillesum children were not really brought up in a "home," but in "a void, a sense of muddled and chaotic emptiness." And these circumstances, says Woodhouse, "are the roots of the chaos which is such a constant theme in the earlier part of the diary." He continues that Hillesum's process of healing and change started when she moved into the home of the sixty-two year old widower Han Wegerif. There she found *another* home: "Wegerif was a tolerant, undemanding, and kind man. As well as the emotional security that she needed, he gave her the sexual intimacy she craved, and provided a safe place for her to come home to. But he could not meet her intellectual needs, nor could he help her dig down into the roots of her own profound discontent, and discover its origins, and so begin to find healing." According to Woodhouse, Hillesum immediately recognized in Spier someone who had the psychological skills to help her. "Whatever his attachment to the rather bizarre practice of psycho-chirology, he was undoubtedly an immensely gifted person as well as a remarkably spiritual man who had been in analysis with Gustav Carl Jung and had worked with him." Spier gave Hillesum "the security, insight and confidence she needed to begin to deal with her own recurring depressions, her suicidal tendencies, and her fear of madness. And he helped her begin to discover,

beneath the chaos of her psyche, a self that was truer and deeper than the shallow and driven girl that she had been.” The first notebooks of Hillesum’s diary are dominated by her relationship with Spier, but it is through this special relationship that “she found herself, for the first time in her life, deeply understood and accepted in all her inner muddle and confusion by someone else who loved her.” She seemed to break through into an inner ground, found her deepest ‘self.’ She considered Spier the midwife of the birth of her soul. At the root of her spirituality was ‘acceptance,’ as she writes herself: “Paradoxical though it may sound: S. heals people by teaching them how to suffer and to accept.” This was at the heart of her first transformation, but many transformations followed. A sign of her transformed personality was her totally changed relationship with her parents.

Like Woodhouse, *Alexandra Pleshoyano* considers Julius Spier—along with Rainer Maria Rilke—the main source of Hillesum’s spirituality. Indeed, it was Hillesum herself, she says, who identified Spier as the mediator between her and God. Pleshoyano wittingly prefers to speak about ‘Spierituality’ and entitles her essay “Etty Hillesum and Julius Spier: A ‘Spierituality’ on the Fringe of Religious Borders.” The author analyzes Hillesum’s notebooks chronologically and demonstrates how Spier introduced Hillesum to different sources of spiritual influences. From Spier, Hillesum “learned the importance of self-discipline in all areas of her life.” He was the teacher who “helped her to probe the depths of herself wherein she encountered what she chose to call ‘God.’” Pleshoyano describes in detail the different sources of Hillesum’s spirituality and the dynamics of her process. She shows how Hillesum’s faith in God became central in her life. Hillesum’s receptivity and non-judgmental attitude towards a large diversity of sources may give the writings of Hillesum an “eclectic outlook.” However, this textual outlook “should not be perceived in a pejorative sense but on the contrary as a universal and spiritual legacy accessible to all those—and there are many—who live on the fringe of all religious institutions nowadays.” In her final conclusions, the author stresses that Hillesum “never renounced her identity as a Jew.”

Pleshoyano emphasizes that Hillesum’s faith in God became central in her life, referring to several relevant passages. Hillesum’s texts, however, evoke different images of God. Which images? In his essay “Etty Hillesum and her God,” *Klaas A.D. Smelik* explores these different images of God in her writings. First, he offers some disciplinary remarks on textual approaches and criticizes ideological appropriations



of Hillesum's writings. According to Smelik, "there is a very great temptation to make statements about Hillesum's religious life while silently tiptoeing past the distinction between literature and reality. Still greater is the temptation to integrate Etty Hillesum in one's own religion or philosophy. This is very characteristic in the reception of her work." Etty Hillesum never became a Christian, as some readers assert, but stayed Jewish. She may be situated in "the group of Jews who had become assimilated before the Second World War." She herself did not want to be ideologically pigeonholed, but during the war she started writing about "we Jews." What about Hillesum's images of God? In Smelik's view, Hillesum's diary "changed from a therapeutic instrument into a conversation with God." In the last notebooks, there are many passages where Hillesum "speaks directly to God." Her use of the word 'God' seemed in the beginning more "an imaginary figure to whom she spoke because doing so made it easier for her to articulate her thoughts." However, a thorough spiritual process took place and the meaning of the word 'God' changed within the notebooks. Different images of immanence and transcendence alternated. "Besides the image of God dwelling within her, Etty Hillesum had another way of writing about God. In these passages, she envisioned a God reminiscent of what is written in the Bible about the God of Israel." Smelik recognizes some similarities with the biblical God (God as the creator of heaven and earth) but he also notices a vital difference with the common conception of God: Hillesum's God is not an almighty God. The most remarkable characteristic of Hillesum's God image is the notion that God "is not almighty, but that He can still call us to account for our deeds." In his final paragraph, Smelik explores Hillesum's faith in people. Hillesum's spiritual quest is "a turning inward that ends in commitment to other people." She believed in God and she believed in man.

Klaas Smelik recognizes a dialogical structure in Hillesum's God experience, but his own research does not focus on the dialogical structure of Hillesum's experience of the divine. In his essay "'You-Consciousness'—Towards Political Theory: Etty Hillesum's Experience and Symbolization of the Divine Presence," *Meins G.S. Coetsier* examines the dialogical structure of Hillesum's experience of the divine presence. What started as an ordinary therapeutic diary, turned into a dialogue between the person Etty Hillesum and *the Other*. Coetsier calls Hillesum a mystic, because she is someone "who is intuitively aware of and attuned to a 'timeless Presence' or 'God,' in and beyond

the world of sensory experience of space and time, encountered and addressed as *You* or *Thou*.” In using the philosophical expression *You-consciousness* (developed by the author after having read Etty Hillesum, Eric Voegelin, Martin Buber, Emmanuel Levinas, Dietrich Bonhoeffer and others), Coetsier refers to “the symbolization of our primary human experience and encounter with the divine.” Assisted by Eric Voegelin’s theory of consciousness as study of the divine, Coetsier analyzes Hillesum’s experience of *You-Consciousness*, concluding among other things that Hillesum’s experience of *You* is “not an internal or world immanent process only: it is an interpersonal activity of transcending that reaches out to God, to others in society and even beyond the life which ends in death.” According to Coetsier, Hillesum wanted to keep *You* alive among the human community. “What comes to be through *You-Consciousness* is the life of dialogue and this life connects the members of the human race.” *You-Consciousness* invites human beings to completely transform damaging systems and provides a basis for political theory. It may show human beings the way to “intelligible reordering of human existence and experience.” One of the powers of Etty Hillesum’s writings, says Coetsier, is that they represent a search for the Good.

Precisely this quality of Hillesum’s texts, mentioned by Meins Coetsier, intrigues *Brendan Purcell*. “To judge an action as objectively evil,” he argues, “we need a standard of goodness.” In his essay “Foundations for a Judgment of the Holocaust: Etty Hillesum’s Standard of Humanity,” Purcell suggests that Etty Hillesum arrived at that standard of goodness. He articulates the richness of Hillesum’s diaries and letters in three dimensions: the personal dimension, the social dimension and the historical dimension. On the personal level, Hillesum arrived (in cognitive openness) “at a level of moral conversion where we can see her reaching for the horizon of the good, in a language and experience which is even more concrete than Plato’s grounding vision of the Good.” Hillesum’s inner dialogues with God remind Purcell Kierkegaard’s articulation of the open self as “relating itself to its own self and by willing to be itself the self is grounded transparently in the power which constituted it.” On the social level, Etty Hillesum—like Plato—is a representative of “the essential requirement of love at the heart of any human society, whether at the micro or macro level.” According to Purcell, Etty Hillesum’s insight into the core of human social existence reaches (more than Plato’s) beyond the merely personal and the merely political to embrace the entire human family. On

the historical level, Purcell (referring to Voegelin and Plato) comes to the conclusion that Hillesum arrived at a judgment on the persecution of her people by her intrinsic *you-relatedness*: “I love people so terribly, because in every human being I love something of You.” Hillesum refused to judge, says Purcell, but “by her living in the eternal now” she judged by affirming “the very reality which that racism attempted to deny and destroy.” Purcell reminds us that we must not forget Hillesum’s much-appreciated Dostoevskian key insight into hell: “The suffering of no longer being able to love.”

Not only Brendan Purcell refers to Dostoevsky. Many authors in this volume do so. Etty Hillesum not only had a Russian mother; she also studied the Russian language and had a deep interest in Russian literature. Hillesum’s spirituality was clearly inspired by Russian writers. In his essay “Etty Hillesum’s Russian Vocation and Spiritual Relationship to Dostoevsky,” *Wil van den Bercken* explains Hillesum’s particular interest in Russia. Her image of Russia—being the philosophical and spiritual opposite of the rational West—is formed by the books of Karl Nötzel and Walter Schubart. Among other things, Hillesum was intrigued by their descriptions of suffering. She copied passages conveying the Russian capacity for suffering: “The Russian bears his burden to the end [...] and suffers to his very depths. We stop halfway and relieve ourselves with words, reflections, philosophies, theoretical treatises [...]” Further, Hillesum’s drive was part of “a spiritual cosmopolitanism,” also inspired by Rilke’s *Stundenbuch*. One of her essential experiences, says Van den Bercken, was of her soul and intellect reflecting “all ages and all countries.” And: “Etty Hillesum retained this universal feeling everywhere, even while imprisoned behind barbed wire in camp Westerbork, sublimating it into inner strength.” Besides Rilke’s magic word *Weltinnenraum*, Hillesum’s used images of Russian vast landscapes to symbolize her “inner landscape.” In the second half of his essay, Van den Bercken studies Dostoevsky’s place in Etty Hillesum’s work, especially the spirituality of Dostoevsky’s novel *The Brothers Karamazov*. The Dostoevskian spirituality, found in Hillesum’s texts, can be divided into three themes: first, the problem of human suffering in relationship to God; secondly, the experience of the creation as Paradise, in spite of evil; and thirdly, a common feeling of responsibility for the evil and an all-forgiving love towards everyone. Van den Bercken approaches these themes in detail and sees several surprising similarities between the Dostoevskian spirituality in *The Brothers Karamazov* and Hillesum’s spirituality. One of his conclusions

is that we “can read Etty Hillesum’s reflections as an echo of Dostoevsky.” He considers Dostoevsky—along with Rilke, Augustine and the Evangelists—one of the main sources of Hillesum’s spirituality.

Hillesum’s spirituality is obviously influenced by several Russian sources, but also—as is generally acknowledged—by sources of the Christian mystical traditions. “Can we speak of mysticism with regard to Etty Hillesum?” asks *Francesca Brezzi* in her essay “Etty Hillesum, an ‘Atypical’ Mystic.” Hillesum’s legacy is clearly influenced by mystical traditions, but “her work never reaches the depth of some great thinkers.” However, Brezzi recognizes in Hillesum’s work “a yearning for a new spirituality.” It is a mysticism that—in the words of the theologian Antonietta Potente—“is born in those societies experiencing events of cultural reforms or of discovering themselves.” This mysticism is not looking for “ecstatic experiences” but for “a meeting, a union with what life really reveals and demands of us.” Brezzi also cites Raimon Pannikar’s notion of mysticism as “an integral experience of life,” creating a new connection with reality. According to Brezzi, Hillesum’s words clearly reflect this form of mysticism. In analyzing Hillesum’s “existential journey,” Brezzi finds typical features of traditional mysticism, like simplicity and search for the essence, detachment and interiorization, inner freedom, finding God in the self, loving intimacy with God, love and responsibility for humanity. In this process, Hillesum’s words seems to echo—“but in a more fragmented and less systematic way”—those of great mystics like Meister Eckhart, Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross. Brezzi also recognizes “unconscious conceptual” links with contemporaries like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose conception of God was close to Hillesum’s notion of the non-omnipotent God who must be helped. Hillesum’s wish to be a host and a friend of God may be considered as “spiritual maternity.” This message of Hillesum’s legacy is highly relevant to the question posed by Adorno, Jonas and others: “Which God after Auschwitz?” According to Brezzi, Hillesum’s answer to this question is particularly meaningful. Hillesum does not conceptualize, but she “embodies a different way of thinking of God in which mysticism is grounded in the experience of unity, search and desire.”

Like Francesca Brezzi, but with a different emphasis, *Paul Lebeau* sees similarities between Etty Hillesum writings and texts of the Christian mystical tradition. In his essay “The Reception of Etty Hillesum’s Writings in the French Language,” the author focuses on the importance of Hillesum’s spiritual journey for contemporary theology and

society. He assures the reader that “Etty Hillesum has become, for the Francophone public, one of the most emblematic figures of a spirituality for our time.” In articulating Hillesum’s spiritual itinerary, Lebeau refers to insights and texts of Teilhard de Chardin, Merleau-Ponty, Ignatius de Loyola, Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Valéry and Paul Claudel. According to Lebeau, it is about time that theologians recognize the significance of Hillesum’s spirituality. The author emphasizes Hillesum’s sympathetic understanding of Christianity. Hillesum’s “spiritual experience—though her premature death prevented her from elaborating it thoroughly—was coupled with a conception of man and his relationship to God that had been passed on to her by ‘tradition,’ with Spier as her privileged mediator. Numerous references, explicit or implicit, which are found in her writings [...] allow us to qualify this tradition as ‘Judeo-Christian.’” This sympathy of Hillesum makes it “thus self-evident that numerous Christian readers from different backgrounds feel challenged and comforted in their belief, in their relation to God and men.” The fact that Etty Hillesum did not become a member of a religious society herself, Lebeau concludes, contributes to her large reception in contemporary pluralistic society.

Is it true, as Solange Leibovici stated in 2000, that the reception of Etty Hillesum is a “complicated story” and that Hillesum’s texts arrived from the beginning at “the wrong quarter,” meaning: “predominantly Catholics and former Catholics, followers of mystical movements or at least people seeking religious and ethical principles appropriate to present-day life?” By analyzing a number of publications from Dutch and Flemish authors of Catholic theological origin, *Ria van den Brandt* explains the complexity of this reception in the 1990’s. She wonders why Roman Catholic theologians of that period—even after the publication of the complete edition in 1986—still referred to the first unreliable edition and its unintended hagiographical introduction: “Most Dutch and Flemish theological authors, reading the introduction of *Het verstoorde leven*, accepted the alleged biographical facts, which fit well with the aura of a female mystic. And many of them stated—as if they had known Etty Hillesum personally—that ‘Etty’ (not: Etty Hillesum or Hillesum, but always: Etty) followed her “summons” for Camp Westerbork “without hesitation,” that she was a “shining personality” in Camp Westerbork and that she had consciously chosen—as a real martyr—her own death. She acted like a female sacrificing mystic: she went, completely selfless, full of God and divine love, her sacrificing way of compassion.” Because of this uncritical methodology,

“Hillesum’s historical and complicated biography was brought back to a manageable and simplified framework: she became a two-dimensional cliché.” This paradigm, says Van den Brandt, implicitly informed many theological discourses and hampered—for some time—a critical and scholarly reception of Etty Hillesum’s texts. In her essay “Etty Hillesum and her ‘Catholic Worshippers:’ Plea For a More Critical Approach to Etty Hillesum’s Writings,” Van den Brandt hopes for a more “critical, serious and scholarly reception within theology and other disciplines.” The worldwide interest in Hillesum’s spirituality is, she concludes, “not only to be attributed to Etty Hillesum’s *unfinished* or *open* image of God but also to the *finished* aspects of that image of God, through which many readers with different backgrounds can identify with her texts.”

### *Writing and Witnessing*

In her essay “Etty Hillesum: A Portrait of a Holocaust Artist,” *Rachel Brenner* focuses on Hillesum’s evolution as an artist, “more specifically, [on] her evolution as a thinking writer, a writer with a well-examined, thoughtful message to the world.” She distinguishes two stages in Hillesum’s development as a thinking artist: the stage of preparation and the stage of the test. The stage of preparation included Hillesum’s growth in Amsterdam, preparing to face “through self-exploration as thinker and artist” the reality of the ultimate destruction. The stage of the test began with Hillesum’s first departure to transit camp Westerbork. There “Hillesum put to test both her ethical perspective and the art she had been striving to shape in defiance of the Nazi terror.” In the first phase, Hillesum gained insight that “her task as an artist was to bring about the victims’ fundamental change in their self-perception *as* they face destruction. She would like to ‘catch and stop their flight from themselves and then take them by the hand and lead them back to their own sources.’” According to Brenner, this intention represents the core of Hillesum’s ethical vision. This was what she taught herself to teach to her fellow-Jews. It is, Brenner writes, “a message of redemption in self-worth and self-dignity.” Only through exploration of our souls might we transform “our hatred for our fellow human beings for whatever race” into love. Love was “the only solution” to the terrible situation of the Second World War. In the second stage, the stage of the test, Etty Hillesum indeed seemed to live and write according her

principles of love and humanity. She seemed to be a “thinking heart,” a “thinking artist” until her deportation to Auschwitz: “As far as this book [the diaries and letters] allows us to follow Etty Hillesum on her way to Auschwitz, we are privileged to see her living up to the ultimate test of human values that she set up for herself.”

Like Rachel Brenner, *Debbie Pevenage* identifies Etty Hillesum as an artist, a “holocaust artist.” Those who deny Hillesum’s artistic qualities should read all her texts and take Hillesum’s development into account. In her essay “‘There was little of that harmonious rolling out of God’s hand:’ Struggle and Balance in the Diaries of Etty Hillesum,” Debbie Pevenage shows that Hillesum’s emotional development is closely related to her writing. The author examines the extent to which parallels can be drawn between her emotional development on the one hand and her writing on the other. She considers ‘struggle’ and ‘balance’ as central themes in this growth. Pevenage emphasizes that Hillesum’s diary functioned not only in a therapeutic way but also as “a ‘rough draft’ through which she attempts to discover the writer within and in doing so improve her writing style.” Hillesum regularly expressed her wish to be a concise writer, a chronicler. Pevenage considers Hillesum’s “move towards simplicity in being *and* writing” as “*the* main theme” in her diaries. She concludes that “the difference in style between the first exercise books and the final ones can be attributed to the fact that Hillesum is only able to write in clear language after she has settled things,” after “the development of a rudimentary mind in balance.” Unlike her early writing style, Hillesum’s later writing style is of “a distinctly higher level,” evoking “high literature.” Pevenage concludes, quoting Klaas A.D. Smelik that “the work has been bequeathed by a gifted writer who was murdered before she could publish.”

In her essay “Etty Hillesum: *écriture féminine*?” *Denise de Costa* is intrigued by Hillesum’s writing style. Like Pevenage, the author recognizes Hillesum’s growth in personality and writing and the “dual function” of the diary: “aside from its highly personal nature, it was also a ‘finger exercise in authorship.’” De Costa evaluates Hillesum’s texts by using Hélène Cixous’ notion of *écriture féminine*, referring to “the feminine libidinal economy” (which may be an economy of both men and women). De Costa explains how this feminine libidinal economy “is the affirmation and the source of life,” “leaves room for the other” and is characterized by “more tolerance.” The feminine libidinal economy is “not an economy of appropriation but of giving and the gift.” The feminine style of writing—*écriture féminine*—manifests itself in “the style

of water.” De Costa explains how this writing style is found in Hillesum’s work: “her writing was a continuation of how she was already living: in the realm of the feminine libidinal economy, where life’s joys and grief can coexist.” Hillesum’s work has affected De Costa in several ways. She admires how Hillesum—under difficult circumstances—wrote her diary and gave answers to great questions. She considers Hillesum’s spiritual resistance a “poetic politics” of “active passivity.” De Costa emphasizes not only the nourishing quality of Hillesum’s work, but also the “midwife” function of her texts: “Letting oneself be read by Etty Hillesum means re-establishing contact with the other and the alien both inside and outside oneself.”

Like De Costa, *Maria Gabriela Nocita*, recognizes the existential—“midwife”—power of Hillesum’s words: “I was enchanted by Hillesum’s path of existential communication.” Inspired by the paradigm within education that “what is human is communicated through what is human,” Nocita believes that Hillesum’s work “transcends space and time and reaches those who are ready to welcome it.” In her essay “Feeling Life: Etty Hillesum becomes Word,” she focuses on “two mysterious inner developments which gradually take shape in Hillesum: her ability to *feel life* and her ability to *communicate life*.” The process of feeling life started with Hillesum’s strong need to express herself, to find her own, liberating words. With Rainer Maria Rilke as her teacher, she learned that writing could be a way to get to know her inner world. It is through contact with her inner space—*Weltinnenraum*—that she was able to find “the spring of words.” In carefully scanning this inner world, Hillesum discovered “her great talent: her ability to feel life.” She refined this ability during her process of maturation. By experiencing the dynamics of her *Weltinnenraum*, she opened up her inner space for the other: “I experience people, and I also experience the suffering of people.” According to Nocita, in being able “to read life,” Etty Hillesum found “the meaning of her existence” and her calling to a vocation to help others. Hillesum arrived at an existential state of living authentically, in which her “words flow from a source so real that they can become life and life becomes word.” During her life, Hillesum became “a living mirror able to communicate existentially with the other.” It was Hillesum’s deepest wish to do something meaningful for future generations: to bear witness, to communicate life to “those who are ready to welcome it.”

In her diary notebooks and letters, Etty Hillesum increasingly expressed her wish to bear witness, to be a chronicler—a “small voice”—of her time, of her people. Her Westerbork letters are



considered a significant testimony on the history of this camp. *Bettine Siertsema*, *Gerrit Van Oord* and *Patricia Couto* focus on Hillesum as a chronicler. They focus on her Westerbork letters, comparing these with other witnesses. *Bettine Siertsema* compares Etty Hillesum's letters with Abel Herzberg's testimony, especially the way they write about their camp experience. In her essay "Etty Hillesum (1914–1943) and Abel Herzberg (1893–1989): Two Dutch Chroniclers of the Shoah," Siertsema—in comparing the two authors—criticizes Hillesum's so-called altruistic reputation: "Although they [Hillesum and Herzberg] have much in common, they differ substantially in their assessment of the people around them. Hillesum, in her criticism of fellow inmates, comes across as less saintly than her general reputation would lead one to assume, while Herzberg is milder in his judgment." The general image of Etty Hillesum, writes Siertsema, is "that of someone who is inspired by a great charity, a love for the whole community that made her choose camp Westerbork instead of the hiding place offered by her friends." Pointing out several passages of Hillesum's texts, Siertsema concludes that Hillesum is "unexpectedly harsh" and rather judgmental. In Camp Westerbork, Hillesum starkly condemns people's attitudes, especially when they are contrary to her own high standards of acceptance and inner strength. Herzberg's judgments are significantly milder. Siertsema suggests that this difference in judgment "is rooted in their different relationships with God and with Jewish tradition." Both authors have a personal relationship with God, but "Hillesum's is of a distinctly individual nature, whereas Herzberg primarily feels himself to be part of the Jewish community, worldwide and through ages." Moreover, Hillesum's eclecticism is strongly inspired by Christian sources and led her to "a very intimate, very personal relationship with God." Whereas 'doing good or justice' is at the centre of Herzberg's religion, 'love' is at the centre of Hillesum's spirituality. These different 'commitments' may explain the differences in the way they wrote about their camp experiences.

In his essay "Two Voices from Westerbork: Etty Hillesum and Philip Mechanicus on the Transport from Camp Westerbork on 24 August 1943," *Gerrit Van Oord* compares Etty Hillesum's and Philip Mechanicus' testimony on one specific Westerbork transport. His assessment of Hillesum seems to differ from Siertsema's evaluation. Van Oord's questions focus on the kind of information the authors intend to convey with their descriptions of the transport, the construction and topics of their texts and the motivation of their writing. After

giving detailed historical information about the authors and the genesis of their texts, he carefully analyzes both reports. His general conclusion is that both witnesses are indispensable for learning about the history of Camp Westerbork. Both reports are based on observations and discussions, but Hillesum's report "convey a generous capacity for feeling for and understanding others." Her report "makes their fears and despair almost palpable, and [...] brings the reader particularly close to the deportees." The report of Mechanicus "leaves little or no room for feelings of compassion." Mechanicus' report is more focused on "reporting the facts, alternating with reflections and comments," like the "spiritual degeneration" of the camp inmates. "For Mechanicus," Van Oord concludes, "observation demands that he maintain a respectable distance from the observed events." This was different for Hillesum.

Hillesum felt the "imperative to witness," says *Patricia Couto*, approaching her testimony from the historical perspective of the Jewish people and their God. In her essay "Witnesses and Victims of Massacre: The Literary Testimony of Samuel Usque and Etty Hillesum," Couto compares *Consolation for the Tribulations of Israel* (1533) of the Portuguese Jewish writer and chronicler Samuel Usque with the letters of Etty Hillesum on Camp Westerbork. "Usque's chronicles included the tribulations suffered during the Middle Ages up until his own time and two letters of Hillesum chronicled the tribulations at Camp Westerbork." According to Couto, both authors were confronted with "the problem that traditional literary forms could not render the experience, both had to create an adequate framework for their testimony—a framework that would be true to the historical facts and to the transcendental dimension that upheld them." They both felt the imperative to witness the history of their people. "Like Usque, Hillesum considers her task of chronicler of Jewish suffering as sacred. Both were aware that in times of crisis and persecution many people tend to feel abandoned by God and then forsake Him. It's the chronicler's duty to remind his or her fellow creatures that the memory of past tribulations gives meaning to the suffering of the present. Only thus salvation can be gained. [...] While Usque's aim was to comfort and assure his fellow creatures that God would fulfil his promise of redemption if they would not abandon their faith, Hillesum's task was to comfort those who suffered and to save God in order to save the whole humanity."

Along with Couto and Van Oord, *Manja Pach* thinks highly of Hillesum's role as a chronicler. Yes, she plays a role in saving "the whole humanity." In her essay "Let's Talk about Hope! Etty Hillesum's Future-perspective—'We may suffer, but we must not succumb'," Pach focuses on Hillesum's expectations. Hillesum hoped to play a role in post-war times and, says Pach, her decision to share the fate of her people was certainly "not inspired by resignation." She had a great love of life and her wish was to be a writer, to be a witness of her time. Nowadays, Hillesum's letters of Camp Westerbork are of vital importance for the post-war generations: "Reading Etty's letters helped me to get nearer to what happened to my father and mother, who both survived, and to my grandparents, my uncles and aunts, who all went through this transit camp and were murdered in Auschwitz and Sobibor." Pach demonstrates Hillesum's "strong will to live" by referring to passages in which Hillesum has visions of the post-war future. In these passages, Hillesum quite often uses the Dutch word *later* (the same in English: "later"): "later when I have survived it all." Pach is convinced that Hillesum kept "space for hope, for thoughts about 'later,' after the war."

Writing, witnessing, publishing. Testimonies need publishers to reach a broad public. In his essay "Context, Dilemmas and Misunderstandings during the Composition and Publication of *An Interrupted Life*, Etty Hillesum's Diary, 1941–1943," *Jan Geurt Gaarlandt* gives us insight into the textual genesis of the first selection of Hillesum's text in 1981: *Het verstoorde leven* ('An Interrupted Life'). Gaarlandt remembers how Klaas A.D. Smelik delivered "a small unattractive pile of papers to him, a text typed [by Johanna Smelik] with a defective typewriter." Gaarlandt started reading, was fascinated and asked Smelik to bring him all the available diary notebooks. These notebooks were "full of hieroglyphs" and seemed "an almost insurmountable barrier for a publisher who from day one had been told never to accept a handwritten manuscript." Gaarlandt found people who were prepared to decipher Hillesum's handwriting. Based on their transcriptions, he selected excerpts for publication. His goal was "to put the contents of Hillesum's most personal and cherished feelings into a consistent and compelling form." In doing this, he decided to leave out German sections, many repetitions, reports of telephone conversations, letters, book quotations, and passages about people who do not reappear in the diary, intimate notes about people who could be still alive, etc. Along with all these considerations and dilemmas concerning the choice of

selections, Gaarlandt also had to make a book that would be read by a large audience. It resulted in the publication of *Het verstoorde leven* ('An Interrupted Life'). After publication of this book, some writers accused Gaarlandt of being the source of Hillesum's hagiographic reception. Hans Bendien, for example, said that Gaarlandt had exaggerated Hillesum's martyrdom in his introduction. In addressing this critique, Gaarlandt discovered that "the typist had sometimes produced incomplete and shoddy excerpts from the exercise books, that she had left out sentences and, worse than that, had added things on several occasions 'in the spirit of Etty.'" But he also admits that some sentences in his introduction "may have contributed unintentionally to a portrait of Hillesum's saintly heroism." The frequently criticized sentence "When her call up comes, she leaves for Westerbork without any hesitation" may have misled many readers. This passage has been adjusted in the 2009 edition. Another criticism was the apparent absence of wartime episodes in the first edition. This criticism turned out to be incorrect: it was Hillesum herself who did not write much about the war. In his final paragraph, Gaarlandt writes about his special meeting with Christine van Nooten, the secret lover of Etty Hillesum's father. Etty Hillesum was the only person who knew of their relationship.

### *The "Thinking Heart"*

Some interpreters like to think of Etty Hillesum as a philosopher. But what did Etty Hillesum herself think of philosophy? What was her attitude towards philosophy? Can we find 'philosophical practices' in her writings? These and other questions are posed by *Fulvio Manara* in his essay "Philosophy as a Way of Life in the Works of Etty Hillesum." In exploring these questions, Manara starts with a 'historic-critical' approach. He reminds the reader that Hillesum mentions and quotes "about twenty philosophers, from Abelard to Kierkegaard, from Augustine to Spinoza." During the war, she read her Dutch translation of Will Durant's book *The Mansions of Philosophy* (1929). According to Manara, Durant tries to elaborate a "coherent philosophy of life" refusing "a philosophy that has lost its significance for the direct experience of life in which every human being is merged." Durant prefers philosophy as (a search for) wisdom and Etty Hillesum's references to his book—such as "Knowledge is power, but only wisdom is liberty"—show that she was inspired by Durant's views. Furthermore,

Manara thinks that a 'lexicographical' approach (of the word 'philosophy' and its derivatives) may give further insight into Hillesum's view on philosophy. The word 'philosophy,' however, is not much used by Hillesum. She makes a notable number of negative and critical notations expressing "a rather elaborate criticism" of philosophy as theory or system. "Life cannot be forced into a system," and this observation by Hillesum seems to navigate her philosophical route. Theories and systems are sometimes needed, but should also be left behind. In order to get a more thorough insight into Hillesum's 'philosophy of life,' Manara concludes that this semantic field of (philosophy related) words should be enlarged in future research. Manara's third approach is the 'alchemic' approach: reading the text *par coeur*: "We have to greet the text as it is, to grant it, to listen to its living voice that speaks to us, and that questions us." Hillesum's texts, says Manara, are texts in which life experiences are 'mirrored.' In these experiences, we are confronted with her process of transformation, her way of living that can be considered as a philosophical practice, reminding us of ancient Greek practices. Hillesum's spiritual exercises (writing, dialoguing, and trying to attain a "cosmic conscience") constituted the very heart of her philosophy. Hillesum's writings, concludes Manara, tried "to embody a philosophical way of being." His reading *par coeur* brought him to the heart of Hillesum's philosophical being.

"In truth we are not ready yet for Etty Hillesum's lucid awareness," says *Maria Filomena Molder* in her essay "Why is Etty Hillesum a Great Thinker?" According to Molder, Etty Hillesum's greatest wish was to become "the thinking heart of the barracks." To understand Hillesum, it is crucial to understand her inner form of resistance: she did not want "to fall into the great process of self-victimization." Among other things, her receptivity to all the extreme and painful aspects of life, her inner knowledge of the "mighty whole" and her (non judgmental) power of observation are extraordinary. In Camp Westerbork, Hillesum wished to be a "photographic plate," registering everything of her surroundings. According to Molder, there are many moments "that she can no longer absorb what she is seeing, and no longer express herself." At these moments, the "demonic power of observing" is not powerful enough to overcome suffering and we can read her "cries of despair." Two weeks before her deportation, Hillesum's "descriptive capacity reaches its highest summit, the most suffering one, permitting us to see in its highest intensity what it means to be a 'thinking heart.'" According to Molder, Etty Hillesum is a great thinker, because we are

able “to seize [in her testimony] the foundation, the ethical principles and the critical conditions of genuine thought.” It is because of “these constitutive traits of her genuine thought” that we are not allowed “to pigeonhole Etty Hillesum in any particular history of philosophy.” Was she a philosopher, poet or prophet? She was certainly a “thinking heart.” We readers, concludes Molder, “are aware that our categories collapse every time we attempt to categorize what is implied in her writings.”

“Important personalities always risk being the object of projection,” says *Nadia Neri*, opposing all inclinations to label Etty Hillesum, especially the inclination to label Hillesum as a Christian thinker. According to Neri, Hillesum herself “showed human and cultural openness” and was inspired by many different sources. In her essay “Etty Hillesum’s Psychological and Spiritual Path: Towards an Ethics of Responsibility,” Neri focuses on the “closeness” of Hillesum’s psychological and spiritual development: “Etty Hillesum wanted to convey to us her joy when she discovered for herself the importance of a firm psychological foundation and later the joy of her conversion. These two paths,” says Neri, “are connected to one person, Julius Spier” and, among other readings, the works of Carl Gustav Jung. Neri emphasizes the *sine qua non* of Hillesum’s exceptional growth: *hineinhorchen* or ‘listening within.’ This daily introspection was not locked up in an egotistic individualism, but resulted in an exceptional spiritual conversion and an ethics of individual responsibility. Through introspection, says Neri, human beings are able to learn about their own psychological mechanisms, about their projections of hate on other individuals and groups. Etty Hillesum’s process—her message of individual responsibility and ‘helping God’—is commendable to those who want to be responsible in “such dark and dangerous times.”

*Frits Grimmelikhuizen* read Etty Hillesum’s *Twee brieven uit Westerbork* (‘Two Letters from Westerbork’) for the first time in 1959. These letters taught him a lot about the terrible history of the Jews during the war. In 1986, he was again confronted with Hillesum’s texts, this time with the complete edition of her available diaries and other letters in Dutch. Grimmelikhuizen started to read her texts and was surprised by Hillesum’s interest in Eastern philosophy, especially in Buddhism. Since then, he has treasured Etty Hillesum “as a friend, and even more, as a fellow artist, a fellow bohemian, a fellow seeker in working, living and loving.” In his essay “The Road of Etty Hillesum to Nothingness,” Grimmelikhuizen tries to show that there is “a significant correlation

between Hillesum's life and writings and Eastern philosophy." According to the author, Hillesum had "a creative form of 'Buddhism.'" She not only used the term 'Buddha' or 'Buddhist' to refer to her daily exercises of introspection; her whole way of thinking and writing bore "a close resemblance" to the 'Buddhist way.' This might have been influenced by Julius Spier, Rainer Maria Rilke, Carl Gustav Jung and others. "Although," Grimmelikhuizen says, "it's doubtful whether Etty Hillesum knew *The Four Noble Truths* [of Siddhartha Gautama], it is amazing how many of these experiences actually apply to her spiritual journey." The author explores Hillesum's 'Buddhist way' of life—not forgetting her Jewish origins—by focusing on subjects such as enlightenment, the inner God, *tikkun olam*, suffering, *Welinnenraum*, attentiveness, detachment, emptiness and simple being. Why does Grimmelikhuizen mention *tikkun olam*? Because in "authentic Judaism, as well as in authentic Buddhism, it is imperative to change the world beginning with yourself. We see that in the Jewish tradition this act of change is called *tikkun olam* ("repairing the world")—this is one of the foremost Jewish 'religious commands' (*mitzvot*). An equivalent principle is found in Buddhism, where a very important act for each Buddhist is to act and to pray in such a way that every being on earth may gain happiness, no matter where they are or who they are—everybody." And this principle was also Etty Hillesum's imperative: to make a better world, starting with yourself. It was the truth of the 'thinking heart' of the Westerbork barracks, who died in Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943. It was the truth of a Jewish woman, murdered by the nazi's, who was convinced that humanity and human dignity can survive in a barbaric world, the hatred around her notwithstanding.

## A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF ETTY HILLESUM (1914–1943)

Klaas A.D. Smelik

(Etty Hillesum Onderzoekscentrum, Ghent University)

Esther (Etty) Hillesum was born on 15 January 1914 in her parents' home at Molenwater 77 in Middelburg, the capital of Zeeland, where her father Levie (Louis) Hillesum had been teaching classical languages (Greek and Latin) since 1911. In Amsterdam, on 7 December 1912, he had married Etty's mother, Riva (Rebecca) Bernstein, who went with him to Middelburg. Etty's father was born in Amsterdam on 25 May 1880, the youngest of four children, to the merchant Jacob Samuel Hillesum and his wife Esther Hillesum-Loeza; Etty, therefore, was named after her paternal grandmother. The family lived at the time at Sint Antoniesbreestraat 31, Amsterdam.

Louis Hillesum studied classical languages at the University of Amsterdam. In 1902, he took his bachelor's, followed in 1905 by his master's (both degrees *cum laude*). On 10 July 1908, he defended his thesis *De imperfecti et aoristi usu Thucydidis* (also awarded *cum laude*). Middelburg was his first teaching assignment. In 1914, he began teaching classical languages at the Hilversum Gymnasium (grammar school), but, due to deafness in one ear and impaired vision, had trouble maintaining order in the large classes at that institution. That is why, in 1916, he moved to the smaller Gymnasium in the town of Tiel in the middle of the Netherlands. In 1918, he became teacher of classics and deputy headmaster in Winschoten in the North-Eastern part of the Netherlands. In 1924, he was appointed to similar positions at the Gymnasium in Deventer, where he became headmaster (Dutch: 'rector') on 1 February 1928. He remained there until his forced dismissal on 29 November 1940, at the request of the German occupier.

Louis Hillesum has been described as a small, quiet and unobtrusive man, a stoic, scholarly recluse with a great deal of humour and erudition. In the lower forms, he had at first experienced serious difficulties maintaining order and in response became an extremely strict teacher. In the higher forms, however, he came into his own. Although interested in Judaism, Louis Hillesum was highly assimilated; he worked, for example, on Saturdays. In Deventer, he was among the city's



leading citizens, and even in Camp Westerbork he maintained these contacts and his cultural interests.

His wife Riva was born to Michael Bernstein and Hinde Lipowsky on 23 June 1881 in Pochep (Russia). Following a pogrom, she was the first person in her family to leave Surazh (Chernigol) and come to Amsterdam on 18 February 1907. She moved in with the Montagnu family, at number 21 on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. Her profession at that time was recorded as Russian-language teacher. On 29 May of that same year, her younger brother Jacob, a diamond cutter, followed, and moved in with the Montagnu family as well. On 10 June 1907, her parents arrived in Amsterdam from Surazh. They moved into the second floor of the house on the Tweede Jan Steenstraat. On 9 January 1913, Jacob married Marie Mirkin, who had come from Warsaw to Amsterdam on 5 May 1913. Their daughter Rahel Sarra was born on 19 October of that year. Shortly afterwards, the entire family emigrated illegally to the United States; only Riva remained behind with Louis Hillesum, to whom she had been married on 7 December 1912.

Riva Hillesum-Bernstein has been characterized as lively, chaotic, extroverted and dominant. Etty's relationship with her mother was a difficult one in the early years, but apparently improved while they were at Camp Westerbork. In addition to Etty, Riva Hillesum bore two more children: Jacob (Jaap), born in Hilversum on 27 January 1916 and named after Louis' father, and Michael (Mischa), named after Riva's father.

Jaap Hillesum completed the Gymnasium in 1933. He went on to study medicine, first at the University of Amsterdam and later at Leiden University. He was intelligent, wrote poems and was attractive to women. Mentally, he was unstable: he was committed to psychiatric hospitals on several occasions. During the war, he worked as an intern at the *Nederlandsch-Israelietisch Ziekenhuis* (Jewish hospital) in Amsterdam.

Mischa Hillesum was born on 22 September 1920 at Winschoten. Even as a child, he exhibited striking musical talent. In 1931, he moved to Amsterdam, where he attended the famous Vossius Gymnasium for three years and spent the rest of his time studying piano. His mentor was the famous Dutch pianist George van Renesse (1909–1994). Around 1939, he was committed to *Het Apeldoornsche Bos* (at that time the Jewish mental asylum in the Netherlands) and treated for schizophrenia. Even after his release, he continued to be extremely unstable.

Mischa was not only an accomplished pianist, he also composed music (his compositions have been preserved).

Etty spent her childhood years in Middelburg, Hilversum (1914–1916), Tiel (1916–1918), Winschoten (1918–1924) and Deventer, from July 1924 on, where she entered the fifth form of the Graaf van Burenschool. The family lived at number 51 on the A.J. Duymaer van Twiststraat (currently number 2). Later (in 1933) they moved to the Geert Grootestraat 9, but by then, Etty was no longer living at home.

After primary school, Etty attended the Gymnasium in Deventer, where her father was deputy headmaster. Unlike her younger brother Jaap, who was an extremely gifted pupil, Etty's marks were not particularly high. At school, she also studied Hebrew, and for a time she attended the meetings of a Zionist young people's group in Deventer.

After completing her school years, she went to Amsterdam to study law. She took lodgings with the Horowitz family, at the Ruysdaelstraat 32<sup>1</sup>, where her brother Mischa had been staying since July of 1931. Six months later, she moved to the Apollolaan 29, where her brother Jaap had been living since September 1933 while he was studying medicine. In November 1933, Jaap moved to the Jan Willem Brouwerstraat 22<sup>house</sup>; Etty followed one month later. In September 1934, Etty's name once again appeared in the registry at Deventer. On 6 June 1935, she took her bachelor's exams at the University of Amsterdam. At that time, she was living with her brother Jaap at Keizersgracht 612<sup>c</sup>.

In March of 1937, she took a room in the house of the accountant Hendrik (Han) J. Wegerif, at Gabriel Metsustraat 6<sup>1</sup>, an address also officially registered as the residence of her brother Jaap from October 1936 to September 1937. Wegerif, a widower, asked Etty Hillesum to take care of the household, but they also began an affair. It was in this house so dear to her that Etty Hillesum lived until her definitive departure for Camp Westerbork in June 1943.

Not much is known about Etty Hillesum's university years. She travelled in left-wing, antifascist student circles, and was politically and socially aware without belonging to a political party. After the publication of her diaries, her acquaintances from this period were amazed to learn of Etty Hillesum's spiritual development during the war years, a period in which she adopted clearly different interests and a different circle of friends, although she did maintain a number of her pre-war contacts. Etty Hillesum took her master's exams in Dutch Law (public

law in particular) on 23 June and 4 July of 1939. Her academic results were not striking.

In addition, she studied Slavic languages at Amsterdam and Leiden, but the German occupation prevented her from completing this study with an exam. She did, however, continue to study Russian language and literature until the very end, and also gave lessons in these subjects. She taught a course at the *Volksuniversiteit* ('Open University') and later gave private lessons until her definitive departure to Camp Westerbork. When she was deported to Poland, she had in her rucksack a bible and a Russian grammar.

The diaries were written largely in her room on the Gabriel Metsstraat, where not only she and Wegerif, but also Wegerif's son, Hans, the German housekeeper Käthe Fransen and a chemistry student by the name of Bernard Meylink were living. It was through Bernard that, on Monday, 3 February 1941, Etty went to serve as 'model' for the psycho-chirologist Julius Spier, at the Courbetstraat 27 in Amsterdam.

Spier (who is almost always referred to in the diaries as 'S.') was born in Frankfurt am Main in 1887, the sixth of seven children. At the age of fourteen, he was apprenticed to the Beer Sontheimer trading firm. There he succeeded in working his way up to a managerial position. His original ambition of becoming a singer was foiled by an illness that left him hard of hearing.

Spier enjoyed moving in artistic circles and set up his own publishing house, by the name of *Iris*. In addition, from 1904 on, he had a pronounced interest in chiromancy. Following his 25th jubilee at Beer Sontheimer in 1926, Spier withdrew from business life to dedicate himself to the study of chiromancy. He underwent instructive analysis with C.G. Jung in Zurich, and at Jung's recommendation opened a practice in 1929 as psycho-chirologist on the Aschaffenburgstrasse in Berlin. The practice there was rather successful. Spier also taught courses.

In 1934, he divorced his wife, Hedl (Hedwig) Rocco, to whom he had been married since 1917, and left the two children, Ruth and Wolfgang, with her. He had a number of affairs, but finally became engaged to his pupil, Hertha Levi, who emigrated to London in 1937 or 1938. Spier also left Nazi Germany, and came as a legal immigrant to Amsterdam in early 1939. After first living with his sister on the Muzenplein, and later in a room on the Scheldestraat, from late 1940 on, he rented two rooms from the Nethe family at the Courbetstraat

27 in Amsterdam-South. There he also set up practice and taught courses. The students at those courses and their friends invited ‘models’ whose hands Spier analyzed by way of practical example.

Gera Bongers, the sister of Bernard Meylink’s fiancée Loes, was one of Spier’s students, and it was through Bernard Meylink that Etty Hillesum was invited to have her hands analyzed during a Monday evening class. This fairly chance encounter proved formative for the course of Etty Hillesum’s life. She was immediately impressed by Spier’s personality, and decided to go into therapy with him. On 8 March 1941, she drafted a letter to Spier in an exercise book.

The next day, she began on her diary, probably at Spier’s advice and as part of her therapy. Little wonder, then, that the relationship with Spier was a major theme in her diaries. For Etty Hillesum, however, keeping a diary was useful for more than therapy alone; it also fit well with her literary ambitions. She wanted to become a writer and her diaries could later provide material for a novel, for example. In this context, it is worth noting that some of her letters contain quotes from her diary. Moreover, she hoped in this way to find a way of describing her thoughts and feelings in a literary manner. That proved not to be easy but gradually she developed her own style of writing and gained confidence in her abilities.

Although his patient, Hillesum also became Spier’s secretary and friend. Because Spier wished to remain faithful to Hertha Levi, and because Etty Hillesum already had a relationship with Han Wegerif, a certain distance was always present in the relationship between Hillesum and Spier, despite its importance to both. Spier had a very great influence on Etty Hillesum’s spiritual development; he taught her how to deal with her depressive and egocentric bent, and introduced her to the Bible and St. Augustine. Etty Hillesum had been reading other authors, such as Rilke and Dostoevsky, since her schooldays, but under Spier’s influence their work also took on deeper meaning for her.

Over the course of time, the relationship with Spier assumed a less central position in Etty Hillesum’s life. When he died on 15 September 1942, she had developed enough to be able to assimilate his death with a certain ease—particularly because she realized the fate that would otherwise have awaited him as a Jew.

In the diaries, one can clearly see how the anti-Jewish measures increasingly impacted Etty Hillesum’s life, even though she had resolved to follow the line of her own spiritual development no matter what. When she was expecting a summons to report to Camp Westerbork,

she applied—at the recommendation of her brother Jaap—for a position with the *Joodsche Raad* (‘Jewish Council’). Through patronage, she received an appointment to the office on Lijnbaansgracht (later Oude Schans) in Amsterdam on 15 July 1942. She performed her administrative duties for the Jewish Council with reluctance, and had a negative opinion of the Council’s general role. However, she found useful the work she was to do later for the department of ‘Social Welfare for People in Transit’ at Camp Westerbork, where to she was transferred at her own request on 30 July 1942.

There it was that she met Joseph (Jopie) I. Vleeschhouwer and M. Osias Kormann, the two men who would go on to play a major role in her life. Her first stay at Camp Westerbork did not last long; on 14 August 1942, she was back in Amsterdam. From there, she left on 19 August 1942 to visit her parents for the last time in Deventer. Somewhere around 21 August, she returned to Camp Westerbork. Early September 1942, she is back in Amsterdam again. On 20 November 1942, she came back to Camp Westerbork, but illness forced her to go home on 5 December 1942. It was not until 5 June 1943 that she had recovered sufficiently to be *allowed* to return to Camp Westerbork. For, unlike what one might expect, she was very keen to get back to the camp and resume her work, to provide a bit of support for the people as they were preparing themselves for transport. It was for this reason that Etty Hillesum consistently turned down offers to go into hiding. She said that she wished to “share her people’s fate.”

Hillesum’s departure from Amsterdam on 6 June 1943 turned out to be definitive, for on 5 July 1943 the special status granted to personnel at the Camp Westerbork section of the Jewish Council came to an end. Half of the personnel had to return to Amsterdam, while the other half became camp internees. Etty Hillesum joined the latter group: she wished to remain with her father, mother and brother Mischa, who had meanwhile been brought to Camp Westerbork.

Etty Hillesum’s parents had moved on 7 January 1943 from Deventer to the Retiefstraat 11<sup>hs</sup> in Amsterdam, after having first attempted to use doctor’s orders to circumvent their forced removal. During the great raid of 20 and 21 June 1943, they were picked up—along with Mischa, who had come to live with them—and they were transported to Camp Westerbork. At the time this occurred, efforts were already being made to obtain special dispensation for Mischa Hillesum on the grounds of his musical talent. The sisters Milli Ortmann and Grete Wendelgelst in particular were behind these efforts. Both the famous

conductor Willem Mengelberg and the director of the Amsterdam Conservatory Willem Andriessen wrote letters of recommendation for Mischa Hillesum, which have been preserved. These attempts proved fruitless, due to Mischa Hillesum's insistence that his parents accompany him to Camp Barneveld where some seven hundred prominent Dutch Jews were interned. This was not allowed; Mischa Hillesum did, however, receive a number of special privileges during his stay at Camp Westerbork.

When his mother Riva Hillesum wrote a letter to the *Höhere SS-und Polizeiführer* Hanns Albin Rauter in which she asked for a few privileges as well, Rauter was enraged and, on 6 September 1943, ordered the entire family to be immediately sent on transport. The German commander at Camp Westerbork, *SS-Obersturmführer* Albert Konrad Gemmeker interpreted this order to include Etty Hillesum, despite the attempts by her contacts in the camp to protect her from this. His superior Rauter had ordered the Hillesum family to be put on transport and Etty was part of this family—that was his simple reasoning. On 7 September 1943, Louis, Riva, Etty and Mischa Hillesum left Camp Westerbork on their way to Poland.

Only Jaap Hillesum did not go with them; at the time, he was still in Amsterdam. He arrived in Camp Westerbork in late September of 1943. In February 1944, he was deported to Bergen-Belsen. When that camp was partially evacuated, he was placed on a train with other prisoners. After a journey full of deprivation and hardship, the train was finally liberated by Russian soldiers in April 1945. Like so many others, however, Jaap Hillesum did not survive the journey.

Etty's father and mother either died during transport to Auschwitz or were gassed immediately upon arrival. The date of death given was 10 September 1943. According to the Red Cross, Etty died at Auschwitz-Birkenau on 30 November 1943. Her brother Mischa died on 31 March 1944, also at Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Before her final departure to Camp Westerbork, Etty Hillesum gave her Amsterdam diaries to Maria Tuinzing, who had meanwhile come to live in the house on the Gabriel Metsustraat as well. Etty Hillesum asked her to pass them along to the writer Klaas Smelik, with the request to publish them if she did not return. In 1946 or 1947, Maria Tuinzing turned over the exercise books and a bundle of letters to Klaas Smelik. His daughter Johanna (Jopie) Smelik then typed out sections of the diaries, but Klaas Smelik's attempts to have the diaries published in the 1950s and early 1960s proved fruitless.

But two letters Etty Hillesum had written, in December 1942 and on 24 August 1943, concerning conditions in Camp Westerbork, did get published. They appeared in the autumn of 1943 in an illegal edition by David Koning, at the recommendation of Etty Hillesum's friend Petra (Pim) Eldering. This edition, with a run of one hundred copies, was printed by B.H. Nooy of Purmerend under the title *Drie brieven van den kunstschilder Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843–1912)* ['Three Letters from the Painter Johannes Baptiste van der Pluym (1843–1912)']. The two letters were preceded by a foreword with a biography of the artist, and followed by a third letter, both written by David Koning to camouflage the true contents. The revenues from the publication were used to provide assistance to Jews in hiding. These letters have since been republished on several occasions.

In the autumn of 1979, I approached the Dutch publisher Jan Geurt Gaarlandt with a request to publish Etty Hillesum's diaries given to me by my father, Klaas Smelik. This resulted in 1981 in the publication of *Het verstoorde leven* ('An Interrupted Life'), and in 1986 in the publication of all Etty Hillesum's known writings in Dutch. Since then, an English and a French translation of the complete Dutch edition have appeared. All these editions and the many translations of parts of her writings are—in Horace's words—a *monumentum aere perennius* ("a monument more lasting than bronze") to this woman who, along with so many others, fell victim to the greatest crime of the 20th century.

ETTY HILLESUM (1914–1943) AND ABEL HERZBERG  
(1893–1989): TWO DUTCH CHRONICLERS OF THE SHOAH

Bettine Siertsema  
(Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, The Netherlands)

In this article, I will compare Etty Hillesum and Abel Herzberg and the way they write about their concentration camp experience. Although they have much in common, they differ substantially in their assessment of the people around them. Hillesum, in her criticism of fellow inmates, comes across as less saintly than her general reputation would lead one to assume, while Herzberg is milder in his judgment.

*Similarities and Differences*

Etty Hillesum and Abel Herzberg have several things in common. Both were Jewish and had partially Russian roots: Herzberg's mother, Rebekka Person, was born in Russia and his father in Latvia, then part of the Russian empire. Both families fled the pogroms under Tsar Alexander III and came to Holland in the same year, 1882. Rebekka's father, Aron Person, to whom his grandson Abel Herzberg was very close, was a *habadnik* of the Lubavitscher school, a Hassidic movement that combines mysticism and rationality. Rebekka felt lonely in Amsterdam and was always a bit homesick for Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Etty Hillesum's mother Riva Bernstein was also born in Russia. At age 25, she was the first of her family to come to Amsterdam; after some time, she was joined by her brother and parents, who later moved to the United States while Riva stayed in the Netherlands. Etty's mother had a Slavic temperament and was marked by

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<sup>1</sup> This family background can be found in Herzberg's biography: Arie Kuiper, *Een wijze ging voorbij: Het leven van Abel J. Herzberg* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1997). Herzberg himself wrote about the religious and cultural roots of his family in *Brieven aan mijn kleinzoon* ('Letters to my grandson'), of which the last chapter is devoted to the spirituality of his maternal grandfather. He tells that originally the Habad-movement tried to reconcile the more mystic Hassidism with the more rational, Talmudic Rabbinism. Cf. Abel J. Herzberg, *Verzameld werk* 2 (Amsterdam: Querido, 1993), 243–337.



her traumatic past.<sup>2</sup> Several critics point out that Etty Hillesum was influenced by Hassidism,<sup>3</sup> possibly through her mother or her contacts with Friedrich Weinreb.<sup>4</sup> Abel Herzberg was familiar with Hassidism through his close relationship with his grandfather.

Hillesum and Herzberg also share a profound interest in spiritual matters, and an open-minded knowledge of religious traditions other than Judaism, although Herzberg tends to be more critical of Christianity than Hillesum. They have similar views of the future after the Shoah and the role the persecuted should take in shaping it. Hillesum writes:

[...] if we have nothing to offer a desolate post-war world but our bodies saved at any cost, if we fail to draw new meaning from the deep wells of our distress and despair, then it will not be enough. New thoughts will have to radiate outward from the camps themselves, new insights, spreading lucidity, will have to cross the barbed wire enclosing us and join with the insights that people outside will have to earn just as bloodily, in circumstances that are slowly becoming almost as difficult. And perhaps, on the common basis of an honest search for some way to

<sup>2</sup> See *Etty*, XIII, and Denise de Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum: Inscribing Spirituality and Sexuality* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 231 (E.T.) = *Anne Frank & Etty Hillesum: Spiritualiteit, schrijverschap, seksualiteit* (Amsterdam: Balans, 1996), 287.

<sup>3</sup> De Costa, *Anne Frank and Etty Hillesum*, 233 (E.T.) = *Anne Frank & Etty Hillesum*, 289–290. Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1987), 97–102. Ellis does not explicitly mention Hassidism, but he calls the mystical element central to her spirituality, and points out the importance of prayer for her, and her understanding, in the midst of suffering, of the beauty of creation and the goodness of life, features that are also connected with Hassidism.

<sup>4</sup> Weinreb writes in his memoirs *Collaboratie en verzet* ('Collaboration and Resistance') on Hillesum among other things: "What I recall is a highly intelligent and highly involved young woman. What I found most striking was her religious sense of things, a quality that she had recently discovered in herself. There was something about her that spoke of an ancient, primeval struggle, the weight of thousands of years—and at the same time something light and joyful." [Cf. F. Weinreb, *Collaboratie en Verzet*, II (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 1969), 1075: Wat mij vooral zo trof, was haar religieus aanvoelen der dingen, een eigenschap, die zij ook eerst toen bij zichzelf ontdekte. Er was bij haar het bittere van het torsen van een oerzwarte last, van duizenden jaren, leek het wel, en er was tegelijk ook iets heel lichts en blijmoedigs.] Hillesum herself writes on her contact with Weinreb: "You develop friendships here that are enough for several lives at once. I still find time every day for a short philosophical conversation with Weinreb, a man who is a private world to himself with an atmosphere all his own that he manages to preserve no matter what happens" [E.T., 607. *Etty*, 647: Men sluit hier vriendschappen, die toereikend zijn voor enige levens tegelijk. Ik vind nog dagelijks de tijd voor een kort wijsgerig gesprek met Weinreb, een man, die een besloten wereld op zichzelf is met een eigen sfeer, die hij door alles heen weet te handhaven.]

understand these dark events, wrecked lives may yet take a tentative step forward.<sup>5</sup>

In 1974, Abel Herzberg was awarded the P.C. Hooft prize, an important Dutch literary prize for the complete works of an author. In his acceptance speech, he told of seeing a dying woman in Bergen-Belsen clutching a volume of Spinoza's *Ethica* in her hands, and concluded from this scene:

Living one's life according to Reason, penetrating to an absolute truth and holding on to that into the bitterest death that turns out to have been possible even in Bergen-Belsen. [...] the victims of barbarity become bearers of humanity.<sup>6</sup>

Hillesum and Herzberg both studied law and they both nourished a literary talent and ambition. Hillesum repeatedly writes about that ambition: "Other girls had visions of husbands and children, but I used to have visions of a hand that was busy writing"<sup>7</sup> and her diary is, among many other things, an exercise in writing.<sup>8</sup> Abel Herzberg had already published a theatre play, a children's serial in a magazine, several brochures on Judaism and Zionism and many newspaper articles<sup>9</sup> by the time he wrote his diary of Bergen-Belsen, *Between Two Streams*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> E.T., 586–587. *Etty*, 624–625: [...] wanneer wij een na-oorlogse, berooide wereld niet méér te bieden hebben dan onze ten koste van alles geredde lichamen en niet een nieuwe zin, die komt uit de diepste putten van onze nood en onze vertwijfeling, dan zal dat te weinig zijn. Uit de kampen zelf zullen nieuwe gedachten naar buiten moeten uitstralen, nieuwe inzichten zullen helderheid om zich heen moeten verbreiden over onze prikkeldraadheiningen heen en zij zullen zich dan moeten verbinden met die nieuwe inzichten, die men zich daarbuiten even bloedig en onder langzamerhand bijna even moeilijke omstandigheden veroveren moet. En op een gemeenschappelijke basis van eerlijk zoeken naar verhelderende antwoorden op al dat raadselachtig gebeuren, zou dan misschien het ontspoorde leven een voorzichtige stap verder kunnen doen.

<sup>6</sup> My translation. In Dutch: "Leven volgens de leiding der Rede, daarmee doordringen tot een absolute waarheid en daaraan vasthouden tot in de bitterste dood, dat blijkt ook in Bergen-Belsen nog mogelijk te zijn geweest. [...] de slachtoffers der onmenselijkheid worden tot dragers der humaniteit." Cf. Abel Herzberg, *Verzameld werk* 3 (Amsterdam: Querido, 1996), 429.

<sup>7</sup> E.T., 116–117. *Etty*, 123: Andere meisjes hadden een visioen van een man met kinderen. En ik had altijd één bepaald visioen: Een hand, die schreef.

<sup>8</sup> Ria van den Brandt, *Denken met Etty Hillesum* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2006), chapter III.

<sup>9</sup> A substantial part of these articles is published in part III of his collective works: Abel J. Herzberg, *Verzameld werk* 3 (Amsterdam: Querido, 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Abel Herzberg, *Tweestromenland: Dagboek uit Bergen-Belsen* (Amsterdam: Querido, 1950). Page numbers in Dutch citations refer to the edition in *Verzameld werk* 2

This is the most important similarity, of course: they both kept a diary during their imprisonment in a concentration camp.

Finally, they have in common that their writings have been favourably received generally, and, especially for Hillesum, perhaps more so by Christian than by Jewish critics. She is not always perceived or accepted by Jewish critics as one of their own, with the Dutch female critics Henriëtte Boas and Tamarah Benima in the front line.

However, there are also important dissimilarities. First of all, of course, their sex, their age (Herzberg was 50 when he started his diary, Hillesum 27) and their family circumstances (Herzberg a husband and father, Hillesum a single woman). But there is also a difference in ideological background. Etty came from a highly secularized family, whereas Abel was raised in a religious, orthodox family and became an ardent Zionist, while Etty was thoroughly assimilated.

Herzberg wrote his diary in Bergen-Belsen in the last year of the war (from August 1944 until after his liberation in April 1945). Hillesum wrote hers mainly in Amsterdam from March 1941 onward; the diary she kept in Camp Westerbork, and maybe even in Auschwitz, is lost. To better compare the texts of these two authors, I will concentrate on her letters from the transit camp Westerbork, written between November 1942 and September 1943, several of which have features resembling a diary.

### *Differences in Literary Style*

The diaries of Hillesum and Herzberg both mix accounts of the actual goings-on of the camp with more general observations and contemplations on human nature, the role of God, the destiny of man, and similar themes. Herzberg employs different writing styles for narrative and reflective sections: in the narrative camp accounts, he uses a clipped style with short sentences and often elliptical grammar (for instance leaving out the verb). The reflective passages are written in long, complicated sentences executed in a more flowing style. They read as if he wants to connect with his former self—the generally respected, well informed opinion maker—and thus keep that part of himself alive. After all, the concentration camp reduced people to fearful, famished,

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(Amsterdam: Querido, 1993). E.T. by Jack Santcross: *Between Two Streams: A Diary from Bergen-Belsen* (London: Tauris, 1997).

dirty beggars; this meant, of course, an irreparable rupture in their lives. In the reflective parts of his diary, Herzberg may have subconsciously been trying to overcome this rupture, this discontinuity.

In Hillesum's texts, we see the reflective and the factual accounts more intertwined. Sometimes, she lets herself get carried away with her personal reflections. In her letter to two women in The Hague, she writes for instance:

I see that I have strayed far beyond your friend K's innocuous request. After all, I was to tell you something about life in Westerbork, not about my own views. I couldn't help it, they just slipped out.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, Etty Hillesum's eyewitness accounts of Camp Westerbork are addressed to an audience: her friends in Amsterdam, and two women in The Hague who were unknown to her but who had asked to be informed about the situation in the camp. Herzberg's diary does not directly serve such a purpose. Of course, as an already accomplished writer and public figure, he considers the possibility of publication, but informing the outside world is not his first objective. At one point, he doubts whether the outside world would want to read about the terrible conditions in the camp at all, fearing an anti-Semitic response (in some sort of blaming the victim). At times, both Herzberg and Hillesum feel that they are not able to render an adequate account of everything they see around them. Hillesum seems to be more handicapped by lack of time, energy and opportunities to reach her friends than Herzberg was in writing his diary.

When we compare the ways Hillesum and Herzberg look at themselves, their fellow inmates and the perpetrators, we have to bear in mind the difference in their situations. The circumstances in Camp Westerbork in 1943 were definitely better than those in Bergen-Belsen in 1944–1945. Yet, the deadly threat of deportation to Auschwitz was more real for people in Camp Westerbork. Ever present, uncertainty penetrated everything. But people did not die of hunger and were not beaten, as in Bergen-Belsen. The hygiene in the cramped barracks of Camp Westerbork may have been lacking, but the hygiene in overcrowded, lice-ridden Bergen-Belsen, rife with diphtheria and typhoid fever, was appalling.

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<sup>11</sup> E.T., 587. *Etty*, 625: Ik merk plotseling, dat ik wel zeer ver buiten de grenzen ben gegaan van het argeloze verzoek van Uw vriend K. Ik zou U immers iets vertellen over het leven in Westerbork en niet over mijn persoonlijke opvattingen. ik kan er niets aan doen, het ontschoot me...

*Perpetrators Portrayed*

A characteristic both diaries have in common is the refusal to pay too much attention to the perpetrators. Neither author wants to go into the motives of the SS-men, although Herzberg can write scathingly and without his usual mildness about direct confrontations with them. On a more abstract level, he tries to find the reason behind the age-old anti-Semitism he perceives. However, in his small collection of essays on Bergen-Belsen that appeared shortly after the war, entitled *Amor fati*,<sup>12</sup> he portrays, among others, an *Unterscharführer*, a *Kapo* and a female *Kapo*. His analysis of them is clearly an attempt to warn his readers of the danger of living without guiding principles, the danger of the emptiness of ordinary man, who is neither good nor evil, but who allows self-interest to prevail above everything else. Although Herzberg is pessimistic about the chances of success, his warnings show he wants to safeguard society against such people and to avert a possible repetition of persecution and mass murder.

Of course, we do not know if, after the war, Etty Hillesum would have written anything at all about the camp. Despite her indignation over the evil she witnesses, it is questionable whether an attempt to influence politics or change society would be in line with her attitude of acceptance and readiness to endure her fate. Furthermore, I think it improbable that she would ever focus on the perpetrators, because of her fear of adding a morsel more to the hatred that already exists:

It has been brought home forcibly to me here how every atom of hatred added to the world makes it an even more inhospitable place.<sup>13</sup>

German soldiers were already drilling at the Skating Club. And I also prayed, "God, do not let me dissipate my strength, not the least little bit of strength, on useless hatred against these soldiers."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> This small collection has not yet been published in English although an English translation has been made by Jack Santcross. [See the contribution by Gerrit Van Oord in this volume, note \*]

<sup>13</sup> E.T., 590 (almost identical statements on pp. 474 and 529). *Etty*, 629: Ik heb daar zo sterk ervaren, hoe iedere atoom haat, aan deze wereld toegevoegd, haar onherbergzamer maakt, dan zij al is (cf. also *Etty*, 497 en 560).

<sup>14</sup> E.T., 329. *Etty*, 344: Er oefenden al Duitse soldaten op het IJscubterrein. En ik bad ook: God, laat me geen kracht, geen snippertje kracht verliezen aan haat, aan nutteloze haat tegen deze soldaten.

Only in her last long letter of 24 August 1943, does Hillesum acknowledge being shocked, “transfixed with terror” by the “[o]afish, jeering faces” of the “Green uniformed Police” “in which one seeks in vain for even the slightest trace of human warmth.”<sup>15</sup> In that same letter, she writes extensively, for once, about Gemmeker, the German commander of Camp Westerbork. It is an ironic portrait of him as a handsome gentleman, an art and music lover. The occasion of this portrait, however, is the imminent departure of a transport to which fifty extra people have been added as punishment for the vain escape attempt of a desperate boy.<sup>16</sup> It is quite clear that Hillesum sees through Gemmeker’s gentlemanlike façade:

He appears at the end of the asphalt path, like a famous star making his entrance during a grand finale. This near-legendary figure is said to be quite charming and so well disposed towards the Jews [...] He could also be said to be our artistic patron here, and is a regular at all our cabaret nights [...] One night not so long ago he escorted an actress back home, and when he took his leave of her he offered her his hand; just imagine, his hand! They also say that he specially loves children. Children must be looked after. In the hospital they even get a tomato each day. And yet many of them seem to die all the same... So far not a single great mind has been able to fathom why that should be. I could go on quite a bit longer about “our” commandant. Perhaps he sees himself as a prince dispensing largesse to his many humble subjects. God knows how he sees himself. A voice behind me says, “Once upon a time we had a commandant who used to kick people off to Poland. This one sees them off with a smile.” [Hillesum then talks about his countenance, with “that grey hair, which makes such a romantic contrast with his fairly young face”, that “sends many silly young girls here into raptures [...]”] With military step, he walks along the line of freight cars, bulging now with people. He is inspecting his troops: the sick, infants in arms, young mothers, and shaven-headed men. A few more ailing people are being brought up on stretchers. He makes an impatient gesture; they’re taking too long about it.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>15</sup> E.T., 651. *Etty*, 694: Dit keer slaat er een grote schrik dwars door me heen. Botte, honende koppen, die men tevergeefs afzoekt om er nog een restje van menselijkheid op te ontdekken.

<sup>16</sup> [See also the contribution by Gerrit Van Oord in this volume.]

<sup>17</sup> E.T., 652–653. *Etty*, 695–696: Hij verschijnt aan het begin van de asfaltweg, zoals de beroemde ster, die pas opkomt in de grote finale van een revue. Om deze commandant weeft men al bijna legendes. Hij heeft zoveel charme en hij meent het zo goed met de joden [...] Ook is hij zogezegd de vader van ons kunstleven hier en een trouw bezoeker van de cabaretavonden [...] Men zegt ook, dat hij een speciale liefhebber van kinderen is, de kinderen moeten het goed hebben, in het ziekenhuis

The same ironic but nevertheless strong condemnation can be read in the few sentences that Abel Herzberg devotes to Gemmeker in his Bergen-Belsen diary. After mentioning some awful incidents, he goes on:

Nevertheless, it is still a Vorzugslager. Unlike Vught, there is no “Prügelstrafe” here. Our commandant is a “good one.” Just like Gemmeker in Westerbork. [...] Commandant Gemmeker loads little children. Commandant Haas (of Bergen-Belsen, BS) unloads little children.<sup>18</sup>

Essentially, Hillesum and Herzberg are in accordance about the SS. But there are important differences in the way they look at their fellow inmates.

#### *Views on the Fellow Inmates*

Both Hillesum and Herzberg see the demoralization and misbehaviour around them. But Hillesum seems inclined to judge the inmates of the camp for their way of being, which to her mind falls short, whereas Herzberg concentrates more on their behaviour. As a prosecutor and judge for the internal administration of justice in Bergen-Belsen, Herzberg is of course fully aware of the moral shortcomings of his fellow inmates, but he shows more compassion than condemnation in his judgment, understanding the hardships that drive people to their misbehaviour. The men in the old men’s home, for instance, irritate him with their constant bickering, fights and wailing. Yet, he immediately realizes how much they have lost, how lonely they are, and how differ-

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krijgen ze iedere dag een tomaat. Toch sterven er hier vele kinderen. Waaraan dat ligt, heeft tot nu toe geen enkele geleerde kunnen doorgronden. Zo zou ik nog vele verhaaltjes kunnen vertellen over “onzen” commandant. Misschien voelt hij zich wel een goedertieren vorst over vele deemoedige onderdanen, God weet, hoe hij zich voelt. Een stem achter me zegt: ‘We hadden vroeger een commandant, die trapte de mensen naar Polen, deze lacht ze naar Polen.’ [...] In militaire pas loopt hij langs de goederenwagens, die uitpuilen van de mensen. Hij inspecteert zijn troepen: zieken, zuigelingen, jonge moeders en kaalgeschoren mannen. Er worden nog enige zieken aangedragen op brancards, hij maakt een ongeduldig gebaar, het gaat niet vlug genoeg.

<sup>18</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 142. *Tweestromenland*, 97: En nog zijn we een Vorzugslager. Hier bestaat geen “Prügelstrafe”, zoals in Vught bestond. Onze commandant is een “goeie”. Net als Gemmeke in Westerbork [...] Commandant Gemmeke laadt kleine kinderen in. Commandant Haas laadt kleine kinderen uit. [Note that Herzberg writes Gemmeke instead of Gemmeker.]

ent this old age is from what they had expected in their working life. In more general terms, he writes:

I am not prepared to gloss over the conduct of the Jews or to forgive them the failings to which they succumbed here. Even so, it is important to know how a person's soul and spirit can be destroyed by the pressure that he is put under. There is nothing that can help to withstand that.<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, throughout his diary, he focuses his (and thus the reader's) attention on the people who are able to maintain their human dignity by selflessness and caring for the weak.

*Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral.* And yet...

And yet I have seen people who [...] acted differently towards their fellow beings [...] When I think of them, I see them as people rising high above the murky common herd, even though they were usually withdrawn, unnoticed, and belonged to the simple toilers and heavers.<sup>20</sup>

Hommage à vous you courageous little grandmother, who remains the same in the old people's home, with your infinitely lovely face, your marvellous head of grey curls, your smiling mouth, your sound and still milk-white teeth, who helps wherever she can, nurses the sick, comforts the dying, helps the weak, gives this one a clean bed sheet, peels a potato for another, covers them, brings them a little warm water, offers a lump of sugar and keeps their faith alive.

Hommage à toi you little boy who cares for his lonely sister, combs her hair each day, and shares a little treat with her. Hommage à toi, you young mother, who manages to look after her child, so that it stays clean and healthy as always. Hommage to all of you, who keep up your spirits and remain yourselves, who have not allowed things to get on top of you, who have not succumbed, who have stood your ground, in this incredible misery.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 110. *Tweestromenland*, 152: Ik ben niet bereid zoetelijk de mantel der liefde om de joden te slaan of om hun de gebreken te vergeven, waaraan zij zich hier overgegeven hebben. Maar men moet wel weten hoe men ziel en geest der mensen verwoest door de druk, waaronder men hen plaatst. Daartegen bestaat geen middel.

<sup>20</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 11. *Tweestromenland*, 72: Erst kommt das Fressen und dann kommt die Moral. En toch... Toch heb ik mensen gezien, die [...] anders stonden tegenover hun medemensen. [...] Als ik aan ze denk, dan zie ik ze hoog oprijzende tussen de bruin-grauwige troep van de massa al waren het in de regel de teruggetrokkenenen, de niet-opvallenden, en behoorden ze tot de eenvoudige werkers en sjouwers.

<sup>21</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 72–73. *Tweestromenland*, 122–123: Hommage à vous, jij kleine dappere grootmoeder, die in het oudeliedenhuis dezelfde blijft, met uw oneindig lief gezicht, uw prachtige grijze krullekop, uw lachende mond, uw gave nog melkwitte tanden, die helpt waar jij helpen kunt, de zieken verpleegt, de stervenden



Nonetheless, occasionally you see someone helping another, a doctor applying a bandage, a woman cooking for a sick person, another doing her washing, or quietly giving a warm coat away, a mother who has adopted one or more orphans and assumed full responsibility for them with the courage that nature sometimes gives its creatures. None the less, it restores your basic faith in the existence of civilizing, constructive forces that will persevere in the community of mankind so as to regulate relationships according to reason, to ideas, to spirit, and not according to force. If you now tell me that these are none the less very small, insignificant and isolated moments in the gruesome life from the world between two streams, I will take from my pocket the book from which people better than you and I have drawn so much wisdom.<sup>22</sup>

The general image of Etty Hillesum is that of someone inspired by a great charity, a love for the whole of humanity that made her choose Camp Westerbork instead of the hiding place offered to her by friends. There is, according to her, no causal connection at all between this love and the conduct of people. Her fellow man has hardly anything to do with it. Yet, she experiences this love as her guiding light. Given that this love is totally irrespective of man's conduct, Hillesum's judgment of her fellow inmates can be unexpectedly harsh. And her phrasing is not always very charitable either.

[When a destitute old woman asks her about the medical help in Poland:] It is almost beyond comprehension, the strength with which

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troost, de zwakken helpt, de een een schoon laken geeft, voor de andere de aardappel schilt, hen toedekt, een beetje warm water brengt, een klontje toestopt en het vertrouwen in hen levend houdt. Hommage à toi, gij kleine jongen die voor uw eenzaam zusje zorgt, haar elke dag de haren kamt, en een stukje lekkers met haar deelt. Hommage à toi, gij moeder, die voor uw kind weet te zorgen, dat het zindelijk en gezond is als ooit. Hommage aan allen, die u handhaaft en u zelf blijft, die er niet onder geraakt zijt, u niet overgegeven hebt, die stand hebt gehouden, in deze onbeschrijfelijke misère.

<sup>22</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 110–111. *Tweestromenland*, 152–153: Toch zie je een enkele man een ander helpen, een dokter, die een verband aanlegt, een vrouw die voor een zieke kookt, een ander die haar was verzorgt, in stilte een warme mantel schenkt, een moeder, die een of meer vondelingen aangenomen heft en voor hen met de moed, die de natuur hare schepsels soms geeft, de volle verantwoordelijkheid draagt. Toch keer je daardoor terug tot het primaire geloof aan het bestaan van beschavende, opbouwende krachten, die zich door zullen zetten in de gemeenschap der mensen om de verhoudingen tussen hen naar rede te regelen, naar ideeën, naar geest en niet naar kracht. En indien gij mij zegt, dit zijn toch maar zeer kleine, nietige en sporadische momenten in het gruwelijke leven van Tweestromenland, dan haal ik het boek uit mijn zak, waaruit beteren dan gij en ik zo veel wijsheid hebben geput.

people whose lives are almost entirely behind them hang on to the wretched bits of carcass that are left.<sup>23</sup>

I have noticed that in every situation, even the most difficult, man generates new faculties that help him go on living. As far as that is concerned, God is merciful enough. And for the rest: several suicides last night before the transport, with razors and so on.<sup>24</sup>

[Talking about all the helpless people, and the orphans that nobody cares for, because the mothers have enough to worry over their own sickly children:] You should see these poor mothers sitting beside the cots of their wailing young in blank and brute despair—<sup>25</sup>

In the original Dutch, this last quotation is more unambiguously callous: “Je moet die moederdieren zien zitten, in een wezenloze en redeloze wanhoop, bij de kribben van hun jankende jongen, die niet gedijen willen.” I would translate: “You should see those mother animals sitting in blank and unreasonable despair beside the cribs of their whining young who refuse to flourish.” And a few lines earlier, she refers to these children as “gebroed” (‘brood’), a pejorative term in Dutch only used for animals.

There are, of course, also people in Camp Westerbork—such as the writer Philip Mechanicus—whom she admires: people who can carry their own fate without loading it on other people’s shoulders (meaning her own?), people who are strong and cheerful. But there seem to be not many of them outside the circle of her direct friends and family.

What bothers her most in her fellow inmates is the inclination to harden, to grow numb to suffering. She tries to bring people to a real consciousness, and fights, if necessary, their numbness.<sup>26</sup> In her letter to the two women in The Hague, she writes:

<sup>23</sup> E.T., 607. *Etty*, 646–647: Het is haast onbegrijpelijk hoe sterk de mensen, die toch hun hele leven al achter zich hebben, hangen aan dat ongelukkige stukje karkas, dat hun nog gebleven is.

<sup>24</sup> E.T., 611. *Etty*, 651: Ik merk, dat in iedere situatie, ook in de moeilijkste, den mens nieuwe organen toegroeien, waardoor hij toch weer verder leven kan. Wat dat betreft is God barmhartig genoeg. En voor de rest: verschillende zelfmoorden vannacht vóór het transport, met scheermesjes en zo.

<sup>25</sup> E.T., 637. *Etty*, 679.

<sup>26</sup> However, according to Gerhard Durlacher, who was in Westerbork in the same period as Etty Hillesum was, the outcome of her conversations was not always desirable. In an interview he says: “I once saw that she comforted someone, but that person got such a fit of weeping that she didn’t recover from that comfort, and just had to go on transport in tears. Most of us had as sort of—it is hard to put it into words—one prunes oneself, when it happened, you couldn’t bear it, but if that was drilled open, you didn’t know which way to turn. Etty thought she had to comfort people and

For those who have been granted the nerve-shattering privilege of being allowed to stay in Westerbork “until further notice,” there is the great moral danger of becoming blunted and hardened [...] No wonder we hear on all sides every day, in every pitch of voice, “We don’t want to think, we don’t want to feel, we want to forget as soon as possible.” It seems to me that this is a very great danger. [...] As if suffering—in whatever form and however it may come to us—were not also part of human existence.<sup>27</sup>

And later, in June 1943, in a letter to Han Wegerif and other friends, she writes:

People here fritter their energy away on the thousand irksome details that grind us down every day; they lose themselves in detail and drown. That’s why they get driven off course and find existence pointless. The few big things that matter in life are what we have to keep in mind; the rest can be quietly abandoned.<sup>28</sup>

A year earlier, she wrote in her diary:

We cease to be alive, being full of fear, bitterness, hatred, and despair. God knows, it’s only too easy to understand why. But when we are deprived of our lives, are we really deprived of very much?<sup>29</sup>

Again, there is a translation problem here. The English text, using the term ‘we’, is more inclusive; the Dutch text clearly speaks of other people: “Dit is geen leven meer, wat de meesten doen: angst, resignatie, verbittering, haat, wanhoop. Mijn God, het is zo goed te begrijpen allemaal. Maar wanneer hun dit leven afgenomen wordt, dan

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perhaps that was good. She sometimes did help, but sometimes she took their self protection away from them.” See J.W. Regenhart, “De weg naar Westerbork,” in: *Men zou een pleister op vele wonden willen zijn: Reacties op de dagboeken en brieven van Etty Hillesum*, ed. J.G. Gaarlandt (Amsterdam: Balans, 1989), 192–209, esp. 201. [my translation]

<sup>27</sup> E.T., 586–587. *Etty*, 624–625: Voor degenen, die het zenuwslopende voorrecht genieten “bis auf weiteres” in Westerbork te mogen blijven, bestaat een groot moreel gevaar: dat van te zullen afstompen en te verharden [...] Men hoort het dan ook dagelijks om zich heen in alle toonaarden: ‘We willen niet denken, we willen niet voelen, we willen zo gauw mogelijk vergeten.’ En het lijkt me toe, dat dit een groot gevaar is [...] Alsof niet het lijden—in wat voor vorm het ook tot ons komt—eveneens tot het menselijk bestaan behoort?

<sup>28</sup> E.T., 608. *Etty*, 648: De mensen versnipperen zich heel erg om de duizend kleine details, die hier dagelijks op je afstormen, ze verliezen zich erin en verdrinken. Daarom houden ze de grote lijnen niet meer in het oog, raken de koers kwijt en vinden het leven zinloos. De paar grote dingen, waar het in het leven om gaat, moet men in het oog houden, de rest kan men rustig laten vallen.

<sup>29</sup> E.T., 459.

wordt hun toch niet veel afgenomen?”<sup>30</sup> [literally translated: “This is not living, what most people do: fear, resignation, bitterness, hatred, despair. My God, it is all so understandable. But when this life is taken from them, is it so very much that is taken from them?”] I think it is a harsh judgment: when you let it sink in, she is saying in so many words that the lives those people live would be no great loss should they be killed!<sup>31</sup>

Hillesum is more concerned with people’s attitudes than with their actions, and she so starkly condemns the attitudes she observes, because they are the very opposite of the way she herself wants to live. It is as if she expects everybody to live up to the high standards of acceptance and inner strength that she herself can maintain, and is disappointed when they fail to do so. She seems somewhat less charitable in her judgment than Abel Herzberg, who comes across as milder and more understanding.

### *Differences in Spirituality*

Perhaps the difference in judgment between the two is rooted in their different relationships with God and with Jewish tradition. Both could be said to have a personal relationship with God, but Hillesum’s is of a distinctly individual nature, whereas Herzberg primarily feels himself to be part of the Jewish community, worldwide and through the ages. The sources which Hillesum draws on for her spiritual growth are rooted in Christianity as much as (maybe even more than) in Judaism. This eclecticism led her to a very intimate, very personal relationship with God: “[w]ith the passing of people” she feels a growing need to

<sup>30</sup> *Etty*, 484–485.

<sup>31</sup> Her attitude towards others is in her diary a bit more balanced than these fragments show. On 7 July 1942, for instance, she writes: “One has to spare people and not burden them with more than is absolutely necessary [...] One has to know what is happening in the world, that is a moral obligation, but people who are close to one, people one loves and who have enough to cope with as it is, ought to be spared whenever possible” (E.T., 481). [*Etty*, 508: Men moet mensen sparen en ze niet meer te dragen geven dan enigszins mogelijk is [...] Men moet weten, wat er gebeurt in de wereld, dat is een morele plicht, maar mensen uit zijn naaste omgeving, die men liefheeft en die al genoeg te verwerken hebben, moet men sparen waar men kan.]

speak to God alone<sup>32</sup> until in the end she feels her life is one great uninterrupted dialogue with God.<sup>33</sup>

Herzberg, on the other hand, talks about his religious views mostly in the context of Jewish tradition. He devotes many pages to the unity of the Jewish people, and he does so intentionally on the high holy day of Yom Kippur. He contemplates the many differences between orthodox and liberal worshippers, between Eastern-European, African and Dutch Jews, but he comes to the conclusion that in all this diversity he can still identify with all of them, and this strong sense of unity fills him with pride and joy. Though he does not consider himself a believer, he nevertheless feels he shares in this unity:

I say it, even though I myself do not profess to the ancient religion, yet still lay claim to my share of Jewish unity.<sup>34</sup>

Love is at the centre of Hillesum's spirituality. For her, love offers a much better way to confront the world than reason or intellect. Herzberg primarily views religion (or to be precise: monotheism) as a matter of ethics, of justice, of being held responsible for one's actions, and he uses reasoning to try and get an understanding of the role of God in the reality of this world. Herzberg finds his standard in Jewish tradition, in the most concise form: "Only one thing counts. Do something for another."<sup>35</sup> (The conclusion of a fragment in which he recites some instances of heart-warming help in the camp.)

Although Julius Spier and Henny Tideman played an important role in her religious development, Hillesum's religiosity is strictly individual,<sup>36</sup> and inadvertently she sees herself and her way of being as the standard according to which she measures her fellow men. This even shows itself in her style of writing: in the original Dutch, she

<sup>32</sup> E.T., 514. *Etty*, 544: Met voorbijgaan van de mensen heb ik alleen nog maar behoefte met jou te spreken.

<sup>33</sup> E.T., 640. *Etty*, 682: Mijn leven is geworden tot één ononderbroken samenspraak met jou, mijn God, één grote samenspraak.

<sup>34</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 64. *Tweestromenland*, 115: Ik zeg het, hoewel ik de oude godsdienst zelf niet belijd en toch op mijn aandeel aan de joodse eenheid aanspraak maak.

<sup>35</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 181. *Tweestromenland*, 209: Er is maar één ding. Doe iets voor een ander.

<sup>36</sup> Wanda Tomassi stresses that Etty Hillesum has a strictly personal religiosity, that ripens as the diary progresses. Cf. Gerrit van Oord, "Italiaans enthousiasme: Het dagboek van Etty Hillesum in Italië," in: *Etty Hillesum in facetten*, Etty Hillesum Studies 1, eds. Ria van den Brandt & Klaas A.D. Smelik (Budel: Damon, 2003), 111–127, esp. 123.

often uses the construction with ‘one’ as subject of the sentence, where the context shows she actually means ‘I’: “Men kon erover spreken [...]...” (“One could talk about it”),<sup>37</sup> “men is af en toe wel eens een beetje moe [...]” (“Now and then, one is a bit tired”),<sup>38</sup> “Men concentreert zozeer z’n aandacht op de anderen [...]” (“One concentrates so much on others”).<sup>39</sup> In many cases, the English translation chooses ‘I’ or ‘we’ as the subject of the sentence.<sup>40</sup>

For Hillesum, God primarily represents security, inner riches, and a source of strength. In some of the imagery she uses, God appears almost as a lover. In one of the rare moments that Herzberg talks about God as a person instead of a principle, he presents the image of God as a judge. In his mind’s eye, he sees a ruthless male nurse who had refused many severely ill Jews admittance to the camp hospital standing before God’s judgment seat. And surprisingly, Herzberg immediately hints at God’s mercy in this role:

In heaven, they will stand before the throne of justice. All that the *Herr Sanitäter* can do then is to hope for God’s mercy. Woe betide him on his day of judgment.<sup>41</sup>

It may come as a bit of a surprise that Hillesum, for whom love is life’s core quality, tends to be a sterner judge of her fellowmen than Abel Herzberg, for whom ethics are more important. Concurring with Rachel Brenner’s article in this volume, my conclusion is that Hillesum’s sternness can be seen in light of her self imposed task of the moral education and the ethical improvement of her fellow victims. In my view, this task is to some extent accomplished at the cost of her emotional support and proximity. The fact that Abel Herzberg—despite his emphasis on ethics—is so much less judgmental, can be

<sup>37</sup> *Etty*, 625; E.T., 587.

<sup>38</sup> *Etty*, 607; E.T., 607.

<sup>39</sup> *Etty*, 649; E.T., 609.

<sup>40</sup> This may also have been the case in the afore cited fragment from the E.T., 611 (*Etty*, 651) about the several suicides, immediately after her remark that God is merciful enough in letting “man” generate new faculties to cope with new situations. Perhaps her remark actually is not on the new faculties that man in general generates, but that she herself generates. Read like this, the following remark about the suicides is less poignant.

<sup>41</sup> Herzberg, *Between Two Streams*, 104. *Tweestromenland*, 147: En de heer Sanitäter zal niets overblijven dan hopen op Gods barmhartigheid. Wee hem, als er recht wordt gesproken. The Dutch is a bit more ambiguous than the English translation: the last sentence can be read as a juxtaposition of mercy and justice.

explained partly by his age and his job as a lawyer, but perhaps mostly because he sees himself as part of the greater whole of the Jewish community of all places and all ages. He feels he partakes in the same ethical vocation, and that in failure he is subject to the same judgment, be it by God or by his own conscience.